ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Immigration and Acculturation in Adolescence

Derya Güngör, PhD

PXL University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Belgium

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Introduction

Adolescents need to develop a socially approved and positive sense of identity for a healthy transition to adult life. This task is particularly challenging for immigrant adolescents and adolescents whose parents were immigrants to the extent that what is considered a healthy and acceptable identity differs between their cultures of origin and residence. Immigrant-origin adolescents need to acquire bicultural/multicultural competence and an integrated sense of identity to navigate successfully and function effectively in their multicultural world.[1] Psychological acculturation research aims to uncover factors that facilitate or complicate bicultural / multicultural development and healthy adjustment in immigrant-origin adolescents.

Subject

Acculturation refers to psychological changes as a result of intercultural contact. There are many theoretical frameworks to investigate these changes in individuals and between groups. From the most commonly studied perspective of a bidimensional model of acculturation, immigrants differ in how strongly they wish to remain in contact with their culture of origin and how strongly they seek contact with the culture at large.[2] Placement in these terms results in many pathways,

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or so-called acculturation strategies including:

- Integration, which is present when high levels of contact with both heritage and mainstream cultures are sought.
- Marginalization, which is the case when there are low levels of contact with either culture.
- Separation, which occurs when one is much more inclined towards one's culture of origin than towards the culture at large.
- Assimilation, which exists when one is much more inclined towards the culture at large than towards one's culture of origin.

Contact can occur at many different levels and at different frequencies and depth (daily interactions, friendships, adoption of customs and traditions, cultural identifications and so on). Regardless, integration has been found to be the most and marginalization as the least preferred *and* adaptive strategy. Integration was argued to be the most adaptive pathway because it implies bicultural competence and flexibility.[2] Importantly, different acculturation strategies are related to individual variations in how well one feels about oneself (i.e., psychological adaptation) and how well one navigates in intercultural settings, for example at school and work environments (i.e., sociocultural adaptation).[3]

Problem

Most acculturation studies focus on this bidimensional approach to understand individual strategies adopted to navigate the migration context. These studies continue to provide convincing evidence for the prominent role of culture and intercultural contact on the identity development and wellbeing of immigrant-origin adolescents. They also show that an integrative cultural affiliation and identity is possible, preferrable, and adaptive in an intercultural context.[3,4] However, today's receiving societies are increasingly multicultural with many of them becoming superdiverse. These superdiverse societies are no longer identified as having one or a few "typical" immigrant groups but are rather inhabited by an ever-lasting flow of newcomers of multiple origins who are "transnationally connected, socioeconomically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants".[5] Furthermore, globalization enables adolescents from both established and recent immigrant groups to interact with many cultures in addition to the parental and local cultures and adopt more than two cultural identities.[6] Acculturation researchers are aware of these developments, yet they are slow in identifying multiple acculturation pathways that are

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general and context-specific. In addition, acculturation strategies are considered personal choices that accompany changes in already existing attitudes and behaviours. However, acculturation is the fundamental aspect of psychological development for adolescents in migration; therefore, acculturation and normative developmental tasks are intertwined.[7,8] As adolescents increasingly participate in the larger society, their identity search does not only occur within their family and ethnic community, but they also need to bridge intercultural distance which is often challenging. Opportunity structures, power distribution and the quality of relationships within each cultural context as well the quality of intergroup relations shape adolescents' self-perception and identity, their acculturative pathways and life choices.

Research Context

Findings reviewed here are from various acculturation contexts, but mostly from first- and second-generation adolescent children of immigrants living in North America or Western Europe.

Key Research Questions

- Why is integration an advantageous acculturation strategy for psychological and sociocultural adjustment?
- Is integration always attainable and desirable?
- Is bicultural acculturation only option for adolescents of immigrant-origin?
- What are the consequences of different acculturation strategies in adolescence?

Research Results

- In an highly ethnically segmented societies where cultural differences are seen as bright boundaries in the way of integration, adolescents distinguish between their private and public lives as belonging to different cultures.[9, 10] Culture maintenance occurs in family life especially when family is embedded in an established, tightly-knit immigrant community who put strong emphasis on cultural transmission.[10, 11] In these acculturation contexts, intercultural contact often takes place in more public, social life. For example, adolescents speak their mother-tongue and celebrate the holidays of their parental culture with their family, whereas they speak the national language and participate in national festivities at school. This frame switching helps them learn and enact normative values and behavioural patterns of the mainstream culture, which, in turn, facilitates sociocultural adjustment.

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Culture maintenance also allows adolescents to receive social support of the family and their ethnic community in times of acculturation stress, that is, psychological strain related to difficulties in bridging cultures, which, in turn, increases their psychological adjustment.[4,12,13]

- Researchers agree that integration is most likely and most positively adaptive when this strategy is supported by multicultural policies and opportunity structures in the larger society.[13] If structural barriers and perceived discrimination are high at the society at large, separation may override integration, particularly if the co-ethnic network emphasizes family bonds and loyalty. Adolescents of immigrant-origin may explore a distinctive ethnic identity and related ethnic practices, traditions and ties as part of their identity development.[4,10] In face of social exclusion and discrimination from the mainstream culture members on the one hand and due to increased need for belonging on the other, adolescents may turn to their in-group and identify with it exclusively. It may also be the case that integration in the form of high identification with both ethnic and national culture members may spur denial and discrimination from the co-ethnics who find a dual-identified adolescent too national (or too white) to be one of them.[14,15] It is under these circumstances some immigrant adolescents disengage from mainstream culture and identification with it --sometimes at the expense of school achievement—for fear of being excluded by co-ethnic peers.[16] Thus, although adolescents derive a sense of collective self-esteem from their ethnic group membership and enhance their psychological adjustment, exclusive involvement with the culture of origin may complicate the development of a flexible identity and sociocultural adaptation.[4,17]
- Perceived discrimination is a strong risk factor for a positive development and identity in adolescence. Immigrant adolescents, like their non-immigrant peers, need social approval and acceptance. But immigrant adolescents, different from non-immigrant peers, are at higher risk as they may experience discrimination due to their heritage culture, race, religion, or language. Immigrant adolescents tend to internalize what they see in the negative social mirror hold to them by the mainstream culture, feel alienated and engage in behaviours that put their health and wellbeing at risk.[17,18] Even though many adolescents do not experience discrimination personally, perceived discrimination against in group may still foster reactive in-group identification and separation as a main acculturation strategy.[19] In fact, some studies show that integration may even be detrimental to adjustment in settings where one’s ingroup is negatively stereotyped (i.e., social identity threat). For example, integration make immigrant-origin adolescents’ wellbeing and academic

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performance suffer in high identity threat situations whereas integration is most beneficial strategy in low or no threat situations. Integration is a double-edged sword due to felt attachment to both stigmatizing and stigmatized groups.[20]

- Findings regarding the conditions and consequences of assimilation are mixed: Some studies report better sociocultural adaptation (or poorer psychological adaptation) in assimilated adolescents, whereas others do not find these connections. In a socially, racially, and ethnically segmented society, the key may be to examine to which segment immigrants tend to assimilate. It is relatively easier for children of middle-class immigrants to assimilate into the middle class, but it is not uncommon among the children of low-skilled immigrants in inner cities to assimilate into the underclass of the mainstream society.[21] The chances for the former group to attain higher education and move ahead in the society are greater than for the latter group. Assimilation to the underprivileged class perpetuates impoverished status related to class differentials.
- Despite all these risk factors in their acculturation contexts, most adolescents of immigrant origin show well, and sometimes even better, psychological adjustment than their non-immigrant peers. Therefore, some researchers turned their focus from adjustment to resilience perspective and asked why and how immigrant adolescents do well despite disadvantages.[14,22] A main finding is that strong family ties and emotional support from family is a primary source of resilience.[14,23] In addition, immigrant adolescents seem to flourish in schools and with teachers who welcome and cherish cultural identities instead of denying or ignoring them. These contexts enhance the feeling of belonging.[24,25]
- Although marginalization is depicted in the bidimensional model as one of four major ways to acculturate, there is little research on marginalized adolescents. Recent cross-cultural research on immigrant adolescents in 13 countries validated the existence of three other acculturation pathways but not that of marginalization. Instead, the researchers reported a “diffuse” pattern to characterize adolescents who may want to integrate with the larger society but lack the necessary social skills.[4] This pattern, which was common among new immigrants, implies indecisiveness about identity and continuing search for a place in the world.
- In the last decade, psychological acculturation literature expanded remarkably in line with the complexity of the phenomenon in an increasingly diversified and globalized world. These studies have shown that (a) bicultural acculturation takes many forms, including

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internally conflicting (negative association) and complementary (positive or no association) cultural affiliations;[26] (b) adolescents simultaneously adopt acculturation strategies and identifications that involve more than two cultures given the superdiverse contexts that allow interactions with many (sub)cultures. A tricultural acculturation, for example, can integrate orientations towards culture of origin, African American and European American cultures among Black immigrant adolescents. Similarly, a tridimensional integration which combines high level of religious (Muslim), national and ethnic identity is not an uncommon acculturation pathway among adolescents of Muslim immigrant families in Europe.[27]

Research Gaps

- Research on acculturation in adolescence is generally problem-focused. There is limited knowledge about positive aspects of acculturation, for example personal and situational factors associated with resilience and cognitive flexibility.
- Acculturation is a gendered process.[10,17] The fact that most acculturation research is gender-blind leaves a great deal of variation in acculturation and adaptation of adolescents unexplained.
- Young adolescents navigate between their social and cultural contexts more fluidly than do older adolescents.[10] Life-span studies, which are rare in the acculturation field, might uncover affordances and constraints on the development of flexibility and long-term consequences of different acculturation strategies.
- Acculturation does not only influence attitudes, identities, and behaviours, but also personalities, emotions, and self-perceptions.[28,29] An interesting finding is the adaptivity of cultural fit in these domains, for instance in terms of psychological wellbeing and school adjustment. More studies are needed to understand how intergroup contact shapes acculturation of these processes in immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents alike and what cultural fit means in superdiverse settings.
- Little is known about the generalizability of findings from immigrant adolescents to adolescents of other, involuntary immigrant groups such as refugees and asylum seekers.

Conclusions

Psychological acculturation research focuses on psychological changes and their ramifications in intercultural settings. Acculturation researchers provided compelling evidence for diversity

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among immigrant adolescents (and adolescents of immigrant origin) with regard to strategies they adopted to navigate their multicultural world. A bicultural acculturation model, assessed along the dimensions of culture of origin and culture of residence has long dominated the acculturation research. It is a common finding that integration is an advantageous pathway over other, more monocultural acculturation strategies. Integration allows adolescents to make the best of their home and host cultures and adjust optimally in these contexts.

However, integration can be challenging for adolescents from culturally-degraded, socioeconomically-disadvantaged and socially-excluded immigrant groups.

Acculturation strategies vary depending on age, gender, familial and structural resources, length of residence, the quality of intercultural relations, and so on; therefore, they should be seen as processes with different adaptive outcomes, rather than preferences or trait characteristics.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Acculturation research provides many useful insights for parents, services, and policy makers. Most notably, adolescents of immigrant origin are not only capable of bridging cultural differences, but they are also willing to integrate them in their relationships, identities, and behaviours. Moreover, they are able to flourish in multicultural contexts if they feel they belong. However, many immigrant groups are under scrutiny and adolescents from these groups are at risk for developing a positive, integrative sense of self and identity.

Adolescents' adoption of acculturative pathways other than integration reflects societal and situational constraints on integrating multiple cultural worlds. Therefore, it is important for parents, policy makers, school authorities and service providers to understand complex, dynamic and interactive aspects of acculturation *in addition to* normative developmental processes. This would also help them promote effective ways to maximize healthy development and positive intercultural relations among adolescents from diverse cultural background in today's increasingly complex and globalizing world.

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