

IMMIGRATION

Immigration and Acculturation in Adolescence

Derya Güngör, PhD

K.U. Leuven, Centre for Social and Cultural Psychology, Belgium

April 2011

Introduction

Adolescents need to develop a socially-approved identity to ensure a healthy transition to adult life. This task is particularly challenging for immigrant youth growing into a social world where their home and host cultures differ considerably in terms of models of a healthy and acceptable identity. Immigrant adolescents need to acquire bicultural competence and flexibility as part of a secure and balanced identity and to function effectively in their multicultural world.¹ Psychological acculturation research is aimed to uncover factors that facilitate or complicate bicultural development and healthy adjustment in immigrant adolescents.

Subject

Acculturation refers to psychological changes in individuals as a result of migration. From the perspective of a bidimensional model of acculturation, immigrants are thought to differ in how strongly they wish to maintain their heritage culture and identity and how strongly they seek involvement with the mainstream society.² Placement in these terms results in four pathways, or so called acculturation strategies:

- Integration is present when high levels of engagement in both heritage and mainstream cultures are sought.
- Conversely, Marginalization is the case when there is minimal interest in involvement in either culture.
- Separation occurs when there is exclusive orientation towards the heritage culture and identity coupled with little or no interest in the mainstream society.
- In contrast, Assimilation exists when exclusive orientation towards the mainstream society is combined with disengagement from the heritage culture.

In general, integration has been found to be the most preferred strategy among immigrants, followed by separation and assimilation, and marginalization is the least frequent. Integration is also argued to be the most adaptive pathway because it implies bicultural competence and flexibility. Importantly, different acculturation strategies are related to variations in how well one feels about oneself (i.e., psychological adaptation) and how well one does in intercultural settings, for example at school (i.e., sociocultural adaptation).³

Problem

The acculturation literature is dominated by research among adult immigrants with the assumption that acculturation strategies are personal choices that accompany changes in already existing attitudes and behaviours. However, acculturation is the fundamental aspect of psychological development for adolescents in migration:⁴ As children enter adolescence they become increasingly engaged in the larger society beyond their family and ethnic community. The quality of relationships within each cultural context shapes their self and identity, acculturative pathway and adaptation to culturally complex daily life.

Research Context

Findings reviewed here are generally obtained in acculturation research on first- and second-generation adolescents of visibly identifiable, low-skilled immigrants living in North America or Western Europe.

Key Research Questions

- Why is integration an advantageous acculturation strategy for adaptation to migration?

- Why do some adolescents adopt integration and others follow “less adaptive” acculturative pathways?
- What are the consequences of different acculturation strategies in adolescence?

Recent Research Results

- Adolescents integrate their heritage and mainstream cultures primarily by distinguishing between private and public spheres.⁵ Heritage culture maintenance occurs in family life and within the ethnic community, whereas intercultural contact often takes place in more public, social life. For example, adolescents speak their mother-tongue and celebrate the holidays of their heritage culture with their family, whereas they speak the national language and participate in national festivities at school. This flexibility helps them learn normative values and behavioural patterns of the mainstream culture, which facilitates sociocultural adaptation, and also allows them to rely on social support of the family and their ethnic community in times of stress, which enhances psychological adaptation.^{6,7,8}
- Researchers agree that integration is most likely when both immigrants and the mainstream society converge on their preference for immigrants’ integration and this preference is supported by multicultural policies and opportunity structures.⁹ If structural barriers and perceived discrimination are high, separation may override integration, particularly when the heritage culture encourages family bonds and interdependence. Adolescent children of immigrants are thought to explore a distinctive ethnic identity and related ethnic practices, traditions and ties, as part of their identity development.¹⁰ In the face of social exclusion and discrimination, adolescents may turn to their in-group defensively, due to increased sensitivity to social rejection in adolescence. Although they derive a sense of collective self-esteem from their ethnic group membership, factor that promotes psychological adaptation, exclusive involvement with the in-group may also complicate the development of a flexible identity and sociocultural adaptation.^{6,11} Even though many adolescents might not have experienced discrimination personally, high group discrimination may still foster reactive in-group identification and separation.¹²
- 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 fail to find these connections. In a segmented mainstream society, the key may be to examine to what segment immigrants 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.¹³ 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 may lead to the reproduction and persistence of socioeconomic impoverishment.

- 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.⁶ This pattern, which was common among new immigrants, implies indecisiveness about identity and continuing search for a place in the world.

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.
- Girls and boys experience acculturation differently.^{7,11} 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 possibly because they are developmentally more flexible and open to new experiences.⁸ 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.
- 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

Integration seems to be an advantageous pathway over other acculturation strategies as it allows

adolescents to make the best of their home and host cultures and adapt optimally.

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

To the extent that the receiving society is intolerant of cultural diversity, as reflected by policies, public discourse and opportunity structures, and perceived discrimination is high, adolescents' adoption of acculturative pathways other than integration reflect situational constraints on integrating two worlds in identity development. Therefore, it is important for parents, policy makers, school authorities and service providers to gain insights for the normative developmental needs and tasks of adolescence as well as the complexity and dynamic nature of acculturation. This would also help them promote effective ways to maximize healthy adaptation in immigrant adolescents.

References

1. Phinney JS, Horenczyk G, Liebkind K, Vedder P. Ethnic identity, immigration, and well-being. *Journal of Social Issues* 2002;57:493-510.
2. Berry JW. Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 1997;46:5-68.
3. Ward C, Bochner S, Furnham A. *The psychology of culture shock*. London, UK: Routledge; 2001.
4. Sam DL, Oppedal B. Acculturation as a developmental pathway. In: Lonner WJ, Dinnel DL, Hays SA, Sattler DN, eds. Online readings in psychology and culture. Unit 8. Chapter 6. Available at <http://www.wvu.edu/culture/readings.htm>. Accessed April 12, 2011.
5. Van de Vijver FJR, Phalet K. Assessment in multicultural groups: The role of acculturation. *Applied Psychology* 2004;53(2):215-236.
6. Berry JW, Phinney JS, Sam DL, Vedder PH. eds. *Immigrant youth in cultural transition: Acculturation, identity and adaptation across national contexts*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2006.
7. Güngör D. The interplay between values, acculturation and adaptation: A study on Turkish-Belgian adolescents. *International Journal of Psychology* 2007;42:380-392.
8. Güngör D, Bornstein MH. Gender, development, values, adaptation, and discrimination in acculturating adolescents. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 2009;60(7):537-548.
9. Bourhis RY, Moïse LC, Perreault S, Senécal S. Towards an interactive acculturation model: A social psychological approach. *International Journal of Psychology* 1997;32: 369-386.

10. Phinney J. Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: A Review of the Literature. *Psychological Bulletin* 1990;108(3): 499-514.
11. Suárez-Orozco C, Qin DB. Gendered perspectives in psychology: Immigrant origin youth. *International Migration Review* 2006;40(1):165-198.
12. Dion KL. The social psychology of perceived prejudice and discrimination. *Canadian Psychology* 2001;43:1-10.
13. Portes A, Rumbaut R. *Immigrant American: A Portrait*. Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press; 2006.