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## Acculturation as a Developmental Pathway

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# Acculturation as a Developmental Pathway

## Abstract

This chapter looks at some developmental issues in the acculturation of children and adolescents with immigrant backgrounds. In addition to raising critical questions about this line of research, the chapter examines some underlying assumptions and their implications for the study of acculturation in younger people. It is argued that ambiguities in the final outcome of acculturation and differences in acculturation experiences of adults and children make it necessary to bring developmental perspectives closer into this line of research among children and adolescents in immigrant families. Against this background a modified developmental contextual model is suggested as an alternate perspective to the understanding of the acculturation of children and adolescents.

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## **Introduction: Defining the Problem Area**

From a relatively obscured research area within the broad field of cross-cultural psychology (Berry, 1990), acculturation has in recent years become one of the most widely researched areas in the field. Nevertheless, these interest and research efforts have not sufficiently attended to a number of questions central to the field: what is the role of normal human developmental changes in the adaptation of children and adolescents who are undergoing acculturation? Does acculturation affect children and adults in the same way? To what extent is acculturation a state or a life-long process? These are some of the questions yet to be fully attended to in acculturation research.

In this chapter however, our interest is on the former issues, i.e., how to understand acculturation and developmental changes taking place among children and adolescents with immigrant background. We prefer the term children and adolescents with immigrant background or children and adolescents from immigrant families to the term 1st or 2nd generation immigrant. This is because many of these children are de facto not immigrants. Many of them were born in the host country. It is their parents who are immigrants. Our intention is to discuss the extent to which the experiences of these children, and the changes they undergo are developmental or acculturation in nature. We first examine the concept of acculturation together with its possible links with human development. We then raise some critical issues and some underlying assumptions in acculturation research on children and adolescents with immigrant background. Finally, we discuss how these critical issues and erroneous assumptions can be met using ideas from developmental contextualism.

## **Acculturation and Development**

Acculturation has classically been defined as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first/hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936, p.149). The outcome may include not only changes to existing phenomena, but also some novel phenomena that are generated by the process of cultural interaction. To distinguish between individual and group level changes, Graves (1967) introduced the concept of psychological acculturation as one that occurs at the individual level. In this case the term acculturation primarily refers to individual level changes in identity, values, attitudes, habits and the like. Acculturation changes are normally geared towards adaptation, i.e., to ascertain that the individual is able to meet the challenges arising from growing up in the midst of two different cultures.

The concept of "development" has been defined variously, however, the different definitions all point to a systematic and organized process entailing enduring changes that are successive in character and take place throughout one's life (Lerner, 2002). Thus, change is one issue common to both acculturation and development. Development also entails differentiation and structuring of previously unstructured fields as well as

restructuring of a previously structured field to become more articulated (Vaslsiner, 2000). The novel behavioral phenomena that are generated by the process of cultural interaction (i.e., acculturation) may also be a result of this type of differentiation and restructuring. From an evolutionary point of view, developmental changes serve to make an individual more adaptive in his or her eco-system. Consequently, both acculturation and development serve the function of adaptation.

Except perhaps for social identity theory (Ward 2001), acculturation studies tend to conceptualize individual changes either as a coping mechanism to a stressful situation induced by the encounter with an unfamiliar cultural context (Berry, Kim, Minde & Monk 1987); or as a need on the part of an individual to learn specific cultural skills so as to thrive and survive in a given cultural context (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The reaction to the stress induced by acculturation is suggested to result in learning of coping skills that are adaptive and functional, otherwise the person is said to be maladapted (Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 1992). Acculturation therefore basically entails learning to deal with a new cultural situation.

Developmental studies on the other hand normally conceptualize individual changes as arising from either one or two processes, namely biological and maturational processes, and environmental learning (i.e., the classical nature-nurture controversy in psychology). As can be seen, while acculturation is basically conceived of as a learning phenomenon, development entails both learning and maturation.

However, biology and maturation are also central to acculturation. Comprehensive cognitive structures are central to the perception and understanding of abstract cultural principles and symbols (e.g., role of maturation in language learning). It seems therefore basic to ask if the learning and maturation is qualitatively or quantitatively different in development as compared to acculturation.

In the absence of acculturation, all individuals undergo development, involving biological and maturational changes and the learning of behaviors that are culturally sanctioned through the interactions that take place in the social environment. This latter form of development is termed enculturation and socialization (Berry et al., 1992). Human development is personally constructed within a specific socio-cultural context. Different people, social and ideological institutions may guide and give direction to the development, but they cannot determine exactly how the individual deals with and internalize its experiences (Vaslsiner, 2000). In this sense we may say that each human represents an individual culture that is expressed through its behavior. Neither developmental nor acculturation theories discuss specifically what happens to this culturally determined process of construction in children and adolescents that are growing up in a multi-cultural setting, as to how they relate to an environment with different, and sometimes mutually exclusive cultural scripts. This issue is, however, reflected in some of the assumptions underlying these theories.

### **Underlying Assumptions and Critical Issues in Acculturation Theories**

Even though the classical definition of acculturation points to reciprocal changes in individuals belonging to the two cultural groups in contact, attention has normally been directed to the group with minority status. This focused attention may seem to suggest that acculturation is relevant only to the minority group member, or that acculturation is not a major source of psychological change in the majority or host group. In line with this assumption, changes in the immigrant or ethnic minority group members are often seen as a result of acculturation. This conceptualization assumes that when a minority group member finds him or herself in an acculturation situation, development stops, and acculturation takes over. Obviously, this is an unsubstantiated assumption. Stated in another way, development continues whether one experiences acculturation or not. It may therefore be inaccurate to conceptualize immigrant adolescents' adaptation outcomes as arising only from an acculturation process without the developmental component. Likewise it may be inaccurate to study the development of children and adolescents without including an acculturation perspective.

Because of the inherent stressful nature of acculturation, it is also assumed that once adolescents with immigrant background report of psychological problems, the antecedent factor is necessarily that of acculturation. Concomitant with this assumption is the disregard for the possible debilitating role of developmental transitions. However, for non-immigrant adolescents, developmental transitions and globalization changes constitute the basis of their adaptation problems. Their adaptation problems are rarely seen as possible difficulties with acculturation (perhaps because of the erroneous assumption that acculturation happens only to the minority adolescent).

While children and adolescents with immigrant background face different adaptation challenges than their parents (Zhou, 1997), their adaptation experiences have often times been attended to using theories developed for adult immigrants (Aronowitz, 1984) or indigenous groups (Berry, 1970; Berry & Annis, 1974). This may pose a danger whereby acculturation researchers may overlook some aspects of acculturation that might be unique to children and adolescents.

A direct outcome of extending acculturation theories developed for adults to children is the acculturation measures used on children. In a number of cases, these measures include host language competence, host national newspaper readership, and amount of time spent together with host society friends as proxies for level of acculturation (Arcia, Skinner, Bailey & Correa, 2001; Farver & Lee-Shin, 2000). It is questionable how relevant these issues are as measures of acculturation for children and adolescents, who through their enrolment in the host national public schools learn the host language fluently and are in daily interaction with members of the host society, at least at school. Thus, it is equally questionable how Separation as an acculturation strategy is a real option for them, as they have to relate to both the majority and the ethnic groups as part of their everyday life. This might be the reason why studies have almost invariably found this strategy to be the second most preferred option after integration (Sam, 1999, June). Note: According to Berry's (1997) Acculturation strategy model, Separation is a strategy in which an individual

places a higher value on holding on to his or her original culture and minimal interaction with other groups, particularly with members of the host society.

While it might be of importance for adults' socio-cultural adaptation to attend the special intercultural training programs advocated for in the "behavior shift" or "social skills" perspective in acculturation (Brislin, Landis, Brandt, 1983; Furnham, 1986; Ward 2001), children do not typically need these special training. The national public school constitutes a natural arena for these training as these skills may be learnt through the close daily interaction between teachers, host and the children with immigrant background. Concerning children and adolescents, socio-cultural skills should however, be operationalized in terms of developmental tasks with different content depending upon age and setting, and focused more directly in the education.

Another issue is the common assumption that the process of acculturation is a stressful one (see e.g., Berry, 1997), and researchers constantly discuss the situation of ethnic minority and children and adolescents from immigrant families against this stressful background (Bashir, 1993). While acknowledging that migration and acculturation may be debilitating (Bashir, 1993) we question the underlying assumption that acculturation is an inherently stressful experience. In his acculturative stress model, Berry (1997) Berry, et al, (1987) point out that acculturative stress does not necessarily result in health problems, and that improved health can result following, for instance, better nutrition and access to better health care.

Also an acculturation model, based on the stress-dysfunction perspective (Berry, 1990) was not found to have a better predictive power than an ethnic identity perspective with respect to psychological adaptation of adolescents with immigrant background. (Sam, 2000). The ethnic identity perspective possibly had a better predictive power because identity formation is a major developmental task for adolescents.

Further, new research on children and adolescent with immigrant background contend that these youth adapt well, and in some cases even better than their host counterparts (e.g. Fulgini, 1998; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder, 2001; Virta & Westin, 1999). It is difficult to reconcile the fact that the majority of children with immigrant background adapt very well (Fulgini, 1998) if the process of acculturation is generally difficult and demanding. Thirdly, the older studies that found children with immigrant background to be poorly adapted have been criticized as being flawed on a number of methodological grounds (Aronowitz, 1984) one of them being that paradigms developed on adult subjects were implemented without further analysis on children and adolescents (Sam, 1995). The new research findings that ascertain good adaptation among children with immigrant background are based on theories that have been developed specifically to deal with the situation of these kids (Sam, 2000; Schönplflug, 1997).

Nevertheless, many of the present theories, in our opinion are far from adequate. One issue where we claim present theories have not sufficiently attended to, is the failure to distinguish between developmental and acculturation changes. Throughout the life-span acculturation and developmental processes invariably occur simultaneously, and in close interaction with each other, making it difficult to identify their independent roles. This problem is compounded by the fact that cross-cultural psychologists while concerned with

acculturation fail to bring developmental issues into their framework. At the same time mainstream psychologists concerned with development, fail to bring acculturation into their theories. Failure to attend to these issues may limit our theorizing of the adaptation of children and adolescents with immigrant background.

### **Some Theoretical Ambiguities**

Although acculturation refers to more than cultural changes (e.g., biological changes, political changes) psychological theories of acculturation focus primarily on psychological changes such as changes in attitudes and mental health that may be linked to the meeting of two cultures (Berry, 1990). This line of theorizing may be subject to post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy. As is common in cross-cultural psychology, assessing acculturation involves examining different aspects of culture to get information about which and how these aspects make a difference in psychological outcomes (Phinney & Flores, 2002). For one thing it is difficult to identify which aspects of culture that may be responsible for an observed change since culture is more than an independent variable impinging on the acculturating individual. From a cultural psychological point of view, culture is part and parcel of the individual and therefore cannot be isolated in order to examine its independent effect on human behavior.

There is also ambiguity in the criteria for a successful acculturation as in some theories, acculturation means assimilation (i.e., being competent in the host culture - Gordon, 1964), while other scientists conceive of successful acculturation in terms of integration or bi-cultural (i.e., being competent in both cultures - Birman, 1994). However, an individual who does not learn about the new culture is often seen as not being acculturated, even though this individual may be quite competent in his or her ethnic culture (i.e., separated in Berry, 1990 terminology).

Contrary to this, recent research findings have made it clear that it is important to recognize the two-dimensional nature of acculturation where individuals may change along two dimensions; i.e., the degree of retention of original culture, and degree of involvement in the new society (Berry & Sam, 1997). However, how the individual may develop along these two dimensions are yet to be discussed.

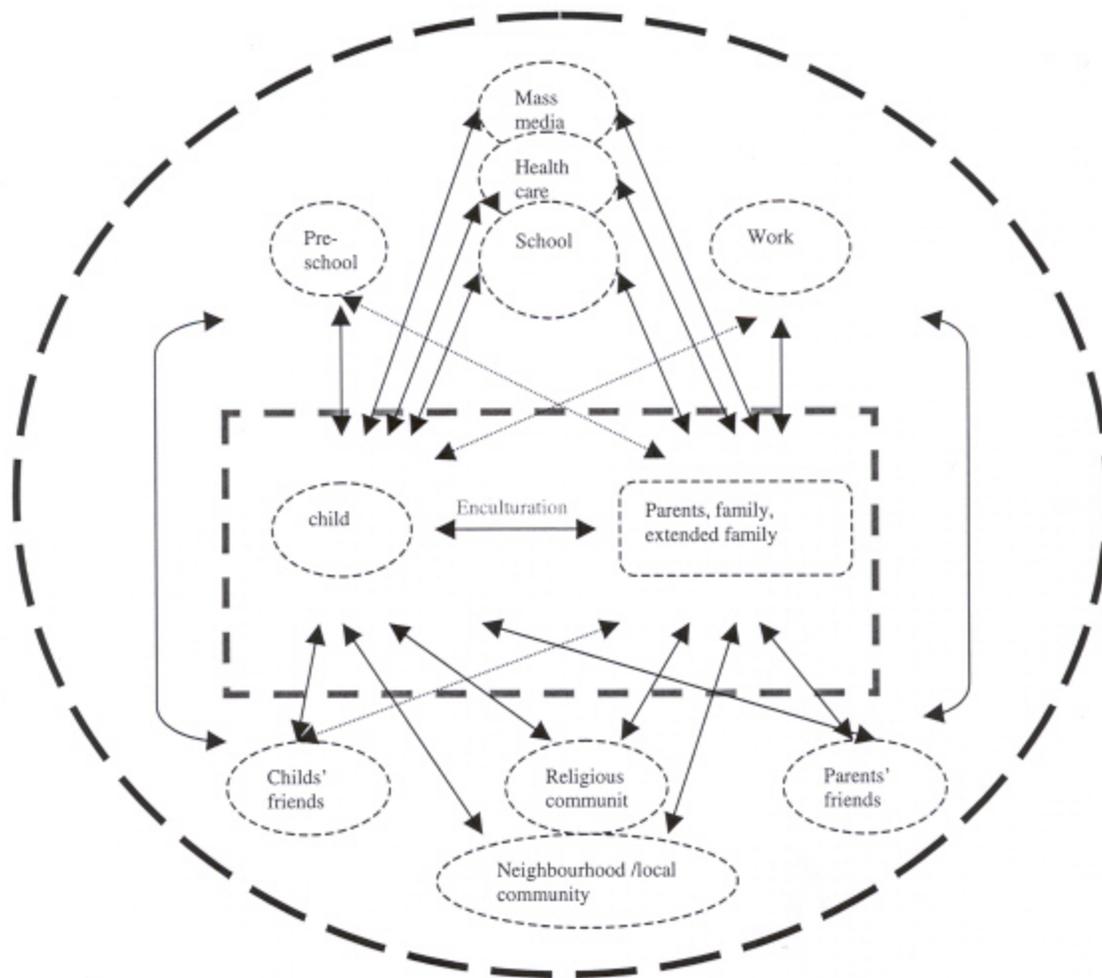
### **A Developmental Pathway**

Modern developmental theories usually underscore the important role of culture in the developmental context of children. To illustrate the importance of culture in human life, it is often depicted in the outmost circles of the model as exemplified by the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the developmental contextualism of Lerner (1986, 2002). However, the theories usually lack more specific information about ways that developmental processes are affected by culture. Further, they are typically based on an assumption that there is only one culture embracing the context, which is of course very often not the case. Because of the way culture is positioned on the periphery of the context, separated from behavior and social interaction, and because of the mono-culture

assumption, it is not readily given how one should accommodate acculturation into these theories. On the other hand, as we have already underscored, acculturation theories and models do not typically specify the relation between culture and human development. Neither do they describe the role of culture in the assumed changes that take place during the process.

There is a need for a theoretical perspective that can integrate the contextual psychological theories with theories of acculturation. This is possible when we modify some existing theories and expand on the assumptions behind them, as illustrated in the Figure.

Interaction characterized main by dominant culture



Interaction dominated mainly by ethnic culture

**Figure 1:** A developmental perspective on Acculturation.

The general view from developmental cultural psychology is that both human beings and the context are culturally constituted, and are interdependent on each other. Human beings exist in a context, and contexts exist because they are constructed by humans (Valsiner, 2000).

Developmental contextualism (Lerner, 1986, 2002) integrates knowledge from biological and social psychological theories, and is based on the defining idea of a continuous, reciprocal, and dynamic interaction between the organism and the context. The model illustrates a child's developmental niche, within a multi-cultural-ecological setting. In accordance with Lerner, the "Context" is depicted as comprehensive scenery that first of all includes the developing person and his or her parents, family and extended family. Further, the context includes various social components, physical setting, and everyday life events that take place, in addition to changes in these variables. One of the fundamental principles in the theory is the reciprocal and mutual influence of these environmental settings and social systems on each other. Further, they all influence on and are influenced by the developing child, either directly or indirectly through for example other family members. The child is seen as an agent acting on the environment, thereby producing novel behavioral outcomes. Building on this, the life span developmental psychology perspective emphasizes the individual's potential for change across life. Due to the relations between the individuals and the context, developmental changes may run along a variety of possible trajectories (Valsiner & Lawrence, 1997). Acculturation - or bicultural development - is one natural pathway for immigrant children and other children growing up in a multi-cultural context.

In the model (see the figure), the child - family dyad is separated from the surrounding context, to mark the superior importance of this relation especially in early development. As illustrated by the permeable walls around the dyad and the two-headed arrows, the interaction and mutual influence of the primary socializing unit with other social elements in the context, gives direction to changes in or adjustments of the behaviors within all these systems .

The various social components of the developmental niche may be classified either as institutional (e.g. schools, work places, health care institutions) or as individual (friends, neighborhood etc). In the model institutional components are clustered together in one part of the circle, and the personal units in another. This is to stress that the activities within the systems may be characterized by different cultural origins. However, as indicated by the two-headed arrows between the systems, there is an ongoing interaction also between the different types of units.

By considering culture both in terms of shared beliefs, values and habits surrounding the developmental context, as well as an integrated part of everyday practices such as social interactions, we may say that the interactions between all the constituents of the context are "saturated" with culture. Culture is situated in the activities, at the interface of the individual and his or her context, as a main ingredient in the everyday experiences of the developing person.

The childrearing practices that are the basis for the interaction within the child - family dyad is an expression of the family's cultural beliefs and traditions, thus inculcating

in the child the ethno-cultural inheritance of their group. This primary cultural learning we call enculturation. Through this process the child learns necessary skills to be competent in and adapt to its own ethnic culture

On the individual level, each person's activity is mostly an expression of its personally constructed culture. On the institutional level, however, the activities are to a larger extent a manifestation of values, beliefs and traditions that are shared on a group level (ethnic, societal, national group level). In a multi-cultural society, these will typically represent the host national culture. In the health care institutions e.g. the activities are guided by laws, knowledge, values and beliefs about health and health behavior that are shared between the majority of the host group members, even if there may be individuals within the system that may hold contrasting personal cultures. This is true also for other institutions as schools, workplaces and mass media: even if the persons within the systems may be representatives of a variety of cultures, their activities within this setting is determined by a superimposed group culture (i.e., the majority culture). This may be different within the personal networks in the local communities, among friends, etc. in which the interaction is dominated by the personal culture of the various network members.

The contact with the social units outside the family is the defined arena for the child's acculturation first of all through the interaction within the institutions that constitute his or her context, such as preschools and schools. Through the inculcation of the majority culture in the child, he or she may acquire the skills and competencies necessary for a successful adaptation outside the family, in the larger society. The individual components may also represent majority culture, to a smaller or larger extent. Most likely, however, they will represent and be supportive of the enculturation process of the family.

The separate contexts in which the different cultures are acquired also provide different support systems. If the host nation's culture is inculcated on an immigrant child so that he or she develops skills and competence in the majority culture, the support of the networks of these institutions may be more readily available for the child. Likewise, as a result of the enculturation into one's own ethnic group, one may be better able to make use of the support sources in the ethnic networks.

It should be noticed, however, that because of the ongoing interaction and mutual influence of the various social systems within the developmental niche, it appears inappropriate to conceptualize acculturation merely as a secondary cultural learning. As the experiences in the extra-familial networks and situations will affect interaction also within the child-family dyad, the acculturation arena should be defined to include the activities in all the social components that constitute the child's social ecological environment. Following this line of thought, acculturation includes both the primary cultural experiences within the family, (enculturation) and the secondary cultural experiences outside the family.

Within a setting of an acculturative pathway, and assuming culture as an integral part of everyday interaction, we argue that the changes that occur along the way as a result of cultural encounters are best perceived of as developmental in nature. Rather than being a process that parallels life span development, it is an integrated part of it, with

differing meanings and challenges at different point in the individual's life. Thus for children and adolescents growing up in a multi-cultural society, acculturation is to be understood as the developmental process towards adaptation and gaining competence within more than one cultural setting, in addition to the creation of novel individual cultures.

A corollary of this line of reasoning is that individuals are capable of developing different cultural scripts to guide their behavior under different cultural circumstances. An important part of this learning includes an understanding of when it is appropriate to switch between the different scripts.

In spite of theories of the detrimental effects of growing up within a context of contradictory cultural experiences, it has been demonstrated that individuals with high level of competence in both own ethnic and majority group culture report of better psychological adaptation than those low on competence in one or both of them. This demonstrates the important potential of the acculturation developmental pathway: as a resource both for the individual and for society.

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Note: The second author's contribution to this chapter is as much as that of the first author.

### Questions for Discussion

(The questions below will require consulting additional sources of literature)

1. In what ways are acculturation and human development similar to, and in what ways are they different from, each other?
2. What is acculturative stress? How may acculturative stress be a source of adaptation problem for children and adolescents with immigrant background?
3. Design a research study where it will be possible to distinguish acculturation changes from developmental changes.

4. In what ways are the acculturation experiences of an adult immigrant different from that an adolescent with an immigrant background?
5. In what ways can acculturation be a source of problem and a source of enrichment for a host national adolescent?
6. Review the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Developmental contextualism of Lerner (1986; 2002) and discuss how either one or both can be used to understand the acculturation of adolescents with immigrant background.
7. Acculturation may impinge on affective, behavioral and cognitive development in a lot of different ways, dependent upon the specific social and ecological context. Discuss potential idiosyncratic vulnerabilities and protective resources related to the development along an acculturative pathway.
8. Developmental tasks may be perceived of as cultural expressions of normative age-specific goals and standards the children have to deal with. Parental childrearing practices are not only a manifestation of their own values and traditions, but they also reflect the roles the adolescents are expected to fulfill in their society as an adult. Discuss developmental task within in an acculturation framework. What do you think would be the particular developmental tasks characteristic to this trajectory?