Reconceptualizing Acculturation: Ecological Processes, Historical Contexts, and Power Inequities

Commentary for Ajcp Special Section on “The Other Side of Acculturation: Changes among Host Individuals and Communities in Their Adaptation to Immigrant Populations”

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Theories of acculturation, stretching back to the 1930s, emphasize how cultural communities change in response to contact with one another (Berry 1997; Redfield et al. 1936). The principle of mutual adaptation that underlies this perspective has infrequently been applied to empirical work. As researchers have applied theories of acculturation to empirical work, primarily in studies of immigrants, work has most often focused on acculturation of immigrants to host communities. The provocative focus of this special section is the alternative: how host individuals and communities change in response to immigrants. In this way, the special section challenges dominant conceptualizations of acculturation.

We are at a unique historical moment for re-examining what acculturation entails and its relevance for theory, research, and action in community psychology and in the social sciences more generally. The U.S. is witnessing the largest wave of immigration in history (Schmidley 2001). Children of immigrants account for half of children in California and 20–30% of children in ten other traditional gateway states for immigrants (Hernandez 2004). Immigrant presence is also expanding in other areas, with 100–200% increases in immigrant populations in 12 states that have not been traditional gateways (Hernandez 2004). Global flows of populations have also increased. Rural to urban migration is soaring in the low-income and middle-income countries, with great variation in experiences of social exclusion within nations at regional and city levels (Guang 2005; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre 2002). Thus, contact between host and migrant communities is occurring at levels that are unparalleled in human history.

In the wake of these rapid and unprecedented changes in migration, we are confronted with opportunities to re-examine what acculturation is and to advance theory, research, and social action. This special section represents a significant step forward, and we hope it will stimulate future work. In this commentary, we build upon the provocative focus of this special section and offer our thoughts on ways to re-conceptualize acculturation. In the following sections, we expand conceptualizations of acculturation beyond that of (1) an individual-level phenomenon; (2) an ahistorical phenomenon; and (3) a phenomenon unaffected by power inequities. In each section, we note the contributions of articles in this special section, tie that work to research in multiple disciplines, and suggest future directions for research.

Reconceptualizing Acculturation

Ecological Perspective

Acculturation, although initially defined by Redfield and colleagues and by many others subsequently as change at the level of communities and cultures, has been most often conceptualized, measured, and analyzed at the individual level. Individuals are thought to vary in their levels of acculturation; acculturation measures are used to assess individuals’ levels of acculturation; and then individuals’ acculturation levels are analyzed in relation to individual-level outcomes such as mental and physical...
health status, social and emotional well-being, and educational achievement.

An ecological perspective opens up our conceptualization of acculturation to include change processes operating at the social setting, social network, organizational, institutional, community, and policy levels. Acculturation processes at these higher ecological levels have less often been conceptualized, measured, and analyzed, but the articles in this special section move the field in that direction by examining acculturation vis-à-vis social networks and social service agencies.

Social networks are ecological settings that have been conceptualized as central to the immigrant experience. In the literature on ethnic enclaves, for example, co-ethnic networks in neighborhoods, work referrals, and social relationships are hypothesized as being central to the positive and negative effects of enclave residence on immigrants’ well-being and social mobility (Borjas 2006; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Yet relatively few studies of immigrants and their relationships to host communities have employed sociocentric network approaches that would focus on relationships and interactions between groups. Investigators in this special section employ an egocentric network approach to study relationships between host and immigrant individuals. Future work could use an egocentric network approach but change the ecological level by examining relationships between immigrant-serving organizations and other organizations.

Public policy change in response to immigration has been debated extensively, but there are few studies of the local effects of these policies (Capps et al. 2002). Some studies in other countries, however, have examined policy changes as a result of domestic migration from rural areas to cities. For example, Yan’s (2003) ethnography of changes in a village in northeastern China across a period of 40 years shows that as rural-urban migration increased, more villagers sought work in cities. Initially villagers performed this work without resident permits, as the rural poor were excluded from legal status. Over time, policies in China changed such that these laws were relaxed somewhat in order to integrate expansion of rural and urban economies. In response, villagers who traveled to cities were more likely to obtain partners and establish families in cities, thereby becoming more permanent urban residents.

Future research should apply ecological theory and measurement strategies to increase understanding of the ecological processes involved in acculturation. For example, future research might address questions of organizational acculturation by applying advances in dynamic systems models of organizational change (for example, Miller et al. 2006). Does increased contact with immigrant populations change the composition, structure, inter-relationships, or resource distribution among organizations in host communities? Such work would require sophisticated measurement approaches for assessing organizational and inter-organizational processes. Other research might address the ways schools change as new groups of immigrant students enroll. This work is particularly important in new immigrant communities that have little infrastructure and experience in serving immigrant students but whose schools are under accountability pressures to demonstrate improvements in student test scores. Observational measures of classrooms might be useful for assessing changes in instruction, and social network analyses might be employed to examine changes in peer networks and peer influences.

Historical Perspective

Acculturation has often been studied ahistorically without much attention to historical changes in sending communities, receiving communities, and the relationships between those communities. A historical perspective on these communities and their inter-relationships can increase understanding of changes in who migrates, the conditions under which migration occurs, and the conditions that affect the mutual adaptation of immigrant and host communities.

A historical perspective can reveal the ways successive generations of immigrants differ from one another and how those differences affect their relationships with one another and with host communities. One generation’s immigrant community can be the next generation’s host community. In New York City, for example, Smith’s (2005) ethnographic work has noted tensions between “newer” Mexican immigrants and “older” generations of migrants from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Investigators in this special section delve into successive groups of Chinese immigrants, finding that early immigrants were part of the host community for recent immigrants and had to adapt their services to accommodate the different dialect spoken by newer immigrants.

Norms for behavior in countries of origin can change rapidly, and these changes have implications for what is observed in successive immigrant cohorts. A dramatic recent example is changes in Chinese urban norms regarding parental work and children’s behaviors in the past 10 or 15 years. Chen and colleagues’ work, for example, showed that behavioral inhibition (a form of shyness) in China was associated with positive teacher and peer perceptions of competence in 1990, showed no associations in the mid-1990s, and by the early 2000s was associated with negative teacher and peer perceptions of academic and social competence (Chen et al. 2006). These changing norms in the sending country may be reflected in differences in subsequent immigrant cohorts in receiving countries. Similarly,
two cohorts of parents separated by 12 years—one of adolescents and one of infants—in Nanjing, China show dramatically different experiences of and identification with their work lives. This difference appears to be largely due to the fact that the older generation of parents was assigned their first jobs, while the younger generation chose their first jobs in the new Chinese economy (Yoshikawa et al. 2008). In addition, observers have noted differences between Chinese immigrant parents in the U.S. and Chinese parents in China in their perceptions of the utility of friendships. This may be in part due to selection factors regarding who emigrates to the U.S., but also could be partly due to the massive economic and social changes that have occurred in China in the years since the immigrant parents left China. Thus, what is observed in a particular immigrant groups’ behaviors and norms in the U.S. reflects their experiences during a particular historical period in the sending country and later in the U.S.; but they differ from their compatriots who did not emigrate and experienced further changes in the sending country.

Sending communities might also acculturate to host community norms through the increasingly globalized communications channels and technologies available for transnational contact. For example, Warikoo’s (in press) recent work on youth cultures in multiracial high schools in urban New York and London showed similarities in the popularity of hip hop culture across schools in the two cities. Smith’s (2005) data on Dominican, Mexican, and other immigrant parents in New York City show that in some cases parents lavish their own parents and other relatives with consumer products from the U.S. during their visits back to their countries of origin. These products, in turn, affect the desires of youth growing up in those countries.

Power Inequities

Conceptualizations of acculturation can be further enriched by including analyses of power inequities and their manifestations as racism, xenophobia, and social exclusion. Whether in the case of international or domestic migration, host and migrant communities negotiate their relationships from different positions of power. The articles in this special section consider power inequities from various angles. They examine differences in power between host and immigrant individuals and communities and between individuals from majority and minority groups. The articles also focus on the helping professions and the implied power imbalance in the relationship between a population in need and a qualified group of helpers. Research on this topic would benefit from further examination of how power differences play out in the relationship between helper and helped, both within and across ethnic groups.

Numerous studies illustrate the ways power inequities are manifested in schools. For example, Gibson’s (1988) ethnographic work with Punjabi Sikh immigrants reveals how an immigrant group’s lower status relative to European Americans is manifested in school policies, teacher practices, and peer interactions. In Gibson’s study, the school’s policies and norms regarding gym classes went against the cultural values of Punjabi parents by requiring that girls wear short shorts, thereby exposing their legs in the presence of boys and men. In addition, some teachers explicitly and implicitly discouraged students from adhering to their parents’ cultural values and encouraged them to adopt “American” cultural values. In peer interactions, Punjabi boys and girls were told they stink, and the boys were harassed for wearing turbans. Harassment was further amplified by students who refused to sit next to Punjabis in class, crowded ahead of them in lines, threw food at them, and stuck them with pins.

Different immigrant communities also vary in their positions of power vis-à-vis the policies, institutions, and organizations in host countries. In their theory of segmented assimilation, sociologists Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that immigrant groups vary in their mobility because of what they bring with them and the social contexts they face in the U.S. Among the salient factors are differences in immigrants’ racial status in the U.S., their social class, public policies toward them, and resources in the communities in which they settle. Eighty-five percent of immigrants are from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa and are largely incorporated as people of color. Immigrants also vary in social class: while some fill skilled labor niches in health, technology, and engineering, others work in the low-skill service economy. While wealthy and middle-class immigrants are able to settle in more advantaged neighborhoods, the majority of immigrants settle in urban, racially segregated neighborhoods with concentrated poverty (Orfield and Lee 2006) and their children often are served by school districts confronting fiscal challenges, dilapidated buildings, overcrowded classrooms, and a chronic record of poor achievement (Hakuta 1998; McDonell and Hill 1993; Snow et al. 1998; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Government policies also differ across immigrant groups with some refugee groups receiving government assistance and supports that are unavailable to other immigrant and refugee groups (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Putting it Together

Future work on acculturation may benefit from related work in various disciplines that integrates ecological, historical, and power perspectives. For example, political scientist Wong (2006) offers an ecological, historical, and
power analysis that focuses on how civic organizations influence immigrants’ political incorporation in the U.S. She challenges individualistic arguments from politicians and public opinion polls that contemporary immigrants are not politically involved because of their lack of assimilation, apathy about U.S. politics, and preoccupation with their native countries. Instead, her analysis offers a historical perspective, noting the vital role local political parties played in politically educating and mobilizing prior waves of European immigrants. Local party activities have declined generally, and existing party activities do not focus on mobilizing newer Asian and Latino immigrants. Instead community-based organizations such as local unions, worker centers, advocacy organizations, social service agencies, ethnic voluntary organizations, and religious organizations have begun to fill the gap in politically socializing and mobilizing immigrants for electoral and non-electoral political activities. Wong further finds that racism and xenophobia contribute to political parties’ reluctance to devote substantial resources and activities to mobilizing immigrants whereas community-based organizations are more likely to work with immigrants including the most marginalized subgroups such as undocumented immigrants, garment workers, and day laborers.

Concluding Thoughts

As we discussed at the outset, countries around the world are witnessing rapid and unprecedented surges in international and domestic migration—changes that provide exciting opportunities to consider the mutual adaptation that occurs when host and migrant communities come into contact. The editors and authors of this special section have already begun to seize on these opportunities by producing and synthesizing empirical work. We have attempted to add a few of our own thoughts to this mix by considering the ecological processes, historical contexts, and power inequities associated with acculturation. We hope they provide some further food for thought and look forward to the next generation of work.

References


