Acculturation: a Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Literature related to the cultural adaptation of strangers to a new culture is examined. Definitions, models and cultural studies are discussed. The article concludes with an assessment of communication variables contributing to acculturation among immigrants. Communication is viewed as the major underlying process as well as an outcome of the acculturation process.

Introduction

"...Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." From the Pilgrims to the boat people of today, foreigners have flowed to America, heeding the call of the Lady of Liberty island. Occasionally, political and social unrest in other nations leads to a rapid influx of immigrants (e.g. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, Vietnam, Haiti). With some immigrants (e.g., Mexicans) the flow continues unabated. All these immigrants are adrift between two different worlds and cultures. Because they come into this culture with different behavioral modes and values, they find themselves separated from the host culture. Separated from their own culture, immigrants are faced with a high degree of uncertainty and many aspects of life are unfamiliar to them. This uncertainty is probably highest at the initial stage and reduces gradually with time. Schuetz (1944) described this stage of the immigrant-stranger as a "field of adventure...a questionable topic of investigation...and a problematic situation itself and one hard to master" (p. 108). Fortunately, in time, most immigrants learn to make sense out of the new "world" around them. They understand better

the norms and values of the culture. This adjustment process is called "acculturation," defined as "the change in individuals whose primary learning has been in one culture and who take over traits from another culture" (Marden & Meyer, 1968, p. 36)

This article reviews the literature related to the acculturation of strangers to new cultures. The emphasis is on immigrants versus short-term visitors, also known as sojourners. The role of communication in acculturation research will be examined.

Acculturation is not a new area of study, since scholars have studied and researched the area since the 1930s. Unfortunately though, a communication approach to the study of acculturation has been minimal and only in recent years a focal point of acculturation research. Yet, communication is essential to acculturation. Communication is the tool assisting immigrants to satisfy their basic personal and social needs in the new host culture. To acculturate themselves to the new culture, immigrants must acquire the host cultural patterns and develop working relationships with the new environment. This cultural awareness process and then necessary adaptation is facilitated by communication. To the extent immigrants master the communication process of the host culture, they will become acculturated.

Definitions of Acculturation

The definitions of acculturation vary depending upon the vantage point of the discipline of the definer. A representative catalog of definitions of acculturation helps us view the growth in scholarly understanding of acculturation. Use of the concept of acculturation appears as early as 1880 (Powell, cited in Herskovits, 1938) , but the earliest classic formulation comes from Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) :

> Acculturation comprehends 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 (p. 149).

In the 1954 formulation by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC, 1954), acculturation was defined as "...culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems. Its dynamics can be seen as the selective adaptation of value systems, the processes of integration and differentiation, the generation of developmental sequences, and the operation of role determinants and personality factors" (p. 974).

The emphasis of these definitions is upon the interactive viewpoint of the acculturation process which understands change to occur in both immigrants and members of the host society. Others view the acculturation process as "monistic"

(i.e., changes occur primarily on the part of the immigrants). This approach was illustrated by the definition of Marden and Meyer (1968), stated earlier in this discussion, where the emphasis was on immigrants "...who take over traits from another culture" (p. 36). Obviously over the long haul, both the host society and immigrants will experience change, but the greatest change will occur among the immigrants.

Young Kim has contributed the most extensive research toward defining acculturation from a communication perspective. Communication is viewed as central to the acculturation process. Thus, "acculturation occurs through the identification and the internalization of the significant symbols of the host society" (Kim, 1982, p. 378). With communication competence central to the acculturation process, it is obvious that one learns to communicate by communicating. As Kim (1982) explains:

> The acculturation process, therefore, is an interactive and continuous process that evolves in and through the communication of an immigrant with the new sociocultural environment. The acquired communication competence, in turn, reflects the degree of that immigrant's acculturation (p. 380).

Hopefully these definitions can serve as both anchors and lighthouses in our search for better understanding of communication and acculturation.

Acculturation Research

Oberg (1960) is generally credited with introducing the concept of culture shock, described as an "occupational disease...the anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" such as customs and words (p. 177). Adler (1975, 1987) prefers viewing culture shock in the broader context of "transition shock," a process in which one experiences "profound learning, self-understanding and change." Zaharna (1989) integrates the idea of "self shock," emphasizing the "double-binding challenge of identity" (p. 501). The challenges faced in "self shock" include loss of communication competence in consideration of the self, distorted self-reflections regarding feedback from others, and the demand of changing identity-bound behavior. Ward, Okura, Kennedy and Kojima (1998) examined the psychological and sociological challenges individuals face with their "strange" new environments in a longitudinal study. They found more of a linear, progressive process of psychological adjustment versus the initial elation stage of the U-curve hypothesis. Adjustment problems were greater at the beginning of new experience and decreased over time. Austin's (1983, 1986) compilations suggest that cultural reentry, aka "reverse culture shock," is a more challenging experience than culture shock. (see Furnham and Bochner (1986) for an extensive

examination of culture shock).

Scholars have, for the most part, ignored the communication aspects of acculturation. For example, Keesing (1953) and Spiro (1955) give comprehensive summaries of the acculturation literature from an anthropological perspective. They concluded that the term "acculturation" was not used consistently in the literature. Sometimes the terms "assimilation," "cultural integration," "accommodation," "absorption," and "self-identification" are used, not necessarily equivalently, but to refer generally to the concept of "acculturation." The communication aspects in the acculturation process go unmentioned.

Some researchers in anthropology and sociology have conducted studies in which communication variables assumed an incidental part (See Nagata, 1969, for an extensive review of literature). Anthropological scholars view communication as the system facilitating the acculturation flow between the two cultures in contact. For example, Shibutani and Kwan (1965) tried to explain inter-ethnic relations in terms of what communication channels can do. Culture was described as "...the product of communication and a minority group develops a distinctive outlook to the extent that it has its own communication channels" (p. 982). In sociological studies, communication behaviors of immigrants have been incorporated as an indicator of social integration (see the summary in Pool, 1965). Other sociological studies regard communication as a factor which is positively associated with the majority-minority relations (Gordon, 1964; Marden & Meyer, 1968). As a whole, these studies suggest that immigrants who pursue interpersonal relationships with Americans socially not only develop a greater acculturation potential but also actually achieve a higher acculturation level (Johnston, 1963; Weinstock, 1964).

Sociologists and anthropologists generally have not viewed communication as a crucial factor in facilitating the acculturation of immigrants. Nagata (1969) argues:

> The acculturational function of communication, be it postulated or observed, has never been fully developed by American sociologists.... A theoretical postulation of the place of communication in the process of acculturation has never been pursued or materialized in any empirical design (p. 79).

When communication variables were included in these studies, they were discussed as nominal factors rather than significant causal factors. Among the communication variables examined in those studies were usage of ethnic publications (Breton, 1964); competency in the host language (DeFleur and Cho, 1957; Johnston, 1963); ownership of television and radio (Graves, 1967); and interpersonal relationships (Weinstock, 1964; Graves, 1967). Notably, these studies did not try to explain the acculturation process totally or primarily within a

communication perspective.

From the above, it is apparent that acculturation studies have come predominantly from anthropologists and sociologists. Psychologists have been notable by their absence. Psychologists Dyal and Dyal (1981) observed that "these two disciplines, along with economics and political science, have staked out and established claim to much of the domain of acculturation research" (p. 303. In an extensive review paper of over 145 acculturation studies by Graves and Graves (1974), no papers published in psychological journals were cited.

In a later special issue of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* on the psychological perspectives on culture change, Berry (1977) indicates increased attention toward the psychological aspects of acculturation because "in recent years psychologists themselves have increasingly engaged themselves with a range of psychological variables which are thought to precede and stem from changes in a cultural system" (p. 131. Researchers in acculturation are seeing the crucial, fundamental role of the individual in the process. Therefore, an analysis of acculturation is incomplete if studied only from the perspective of institutions (sociological approach) or cultural patterns (anthropological perspective.

Some of the psychological variables identified by Berry (1980) include cognitive style, personality, identity, attitudes, acculturative stress, and language. Language development and fluency is the sole communication-oriented variable in the group (see also Nicassio, 1985).

Berry (1980) views acculturation as adaptation, the reduction of conflict, which is conceptualized in three modes: adjustment, reaction, and withdrawal. He advocates a three-phase course to acculturation: contact, conflict, and adaptation. Contact is a core concept to the acculturation process. The nature, permanence, purpose, and duration of contact contribute to acculturation phenomena. Berry states that "the least acculturation may take place where there is no purpose (contact is accidental) , where trade is mutually desired, or where contact is short-lived; the greatest acculturation will take place where the purpose is a deliberate takeover of a society (e.g., by invasion) or of its skills or beliefs (e.g., by settlement)" (p. 11.

Berry (1994, 1997) later posited two basic dimensions of acculturation: maintenance of original cultural identity and maintenance of relations with other groups. By extension, he advocates four acculturation strategies: integration, separation, assimilation and marginalization. Integration refers to those individuals who value both cultural maintenance and intergroup relations. Those who advocate cultural maintenance but do not value intergroup relations are described as separatists. Assimilation refers to a rejection of cultural identity and the adoption of the host culture. Marginalization describes those who value neither cultural maintenance nor intergroup relations. Those who practice the strategy of integration are hypothesized to experience the fewest difficulties in adaptation.

In a study of 104 foreign residents in Nepal, Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) examined acculturation modes among the dimensions of host country and country of origin as to their relationship to psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Strong co-national identification predicted enhanced psychological well-being while strong host national identification was associated with better sociocultural adaptation. The relationship between psychological and sociocultural adaptation changes according to the circumstances of acculturation–the correlation increases with proximity to or integration of the host culture. Using Berry's four acculturation strategies (1997), those who adopted an integrated style experienced significantly less psychological distress than did others. Respondents who preferred the assimilation style reported less social difficulty.

Kosic (2002) found integration to be an adaptive acculturation strategy but not better than assimilation in her study of Croatian and Polish immigration to Italy. This may be due to the similarity of the native and host cultures (Croatia, Poland and Italy).

In a similar construct to Berry's model, Guan and Dodder (2001) compared the impact of cross cultural contact on values and identity on 107 Chinese students in the U.S. versus 185 Chinese students in China. Four value dimensions were tested: group integration, self-protection, cultural conservation and social order. The researchers expected Chinese students in China to score higher on all the values because contact with the U.S. culture would presumably diminish the importance of the dimensions among the U.S. group. No significant difference was found in the social order dimension. Unexpectedly, the China group scored lower in group integration and self protection. They scored higher in cultural conservation as predicted.

In recent years, acculturation research has resurged; still communication is not a focal point. Researchers have examined the relationship between acculturation and ethnic change, parental goals, personality traits, and stress, among other variables. They also continue to develop new models of acculturation.

Oetting and Beauvais (1991) developed an expanded theory of cultural identification–the "Orthogonal Cultural Identification Theory." This perspective contrasts traditional cultural adaptation models such as dominant majority, multidimensional and bicultural. The orthogonal model states that cultural identification dimensions are independent of each other. Any combination of cultural identification direction/level is possible, any change is possible but not necessary. Survey items must measure identification separately to determine if identification is low/low, high/high or in other combinations. Strongly bicultural youth have the highest self-esteem and strongest socialization links. Youth low in identification with both cultures rated lowest in self-esteem and socialization.

LaRoche *et al.* (1996) examined the ethnic change that French Canadians in Quebec experienced in their contact with English Canadian influences. They

concluded that ethnic change, as an aspect of acculturation, is a multidimensional process, involving the dimensions of ethnic affiliation and acculturative tendency. A significant level of acculturation toward the English was found despite continuing strong ethnic identification with the French Canadian culture.

Phalet and Schonpflug (2001) investigated the impact of parental goals and acculturation contexts on value transmission in Turkish and Moroccan immigrant families in Germany and the Netherlands. The expected selective intergenerational transmission of core collectivism values across acculturation contexts was confirmed. Across cultures, more collectivistic parents emphasized conformity more, thus enhancing greater transmission of values.

Forman and Zachar (2001) revisited the classic U-curve adjustment model in addition to testing the connection between personality traits (flexibility, confidence, perfectionism, rigidity) and acculturation. Moderate support was indicated for the personality trait model. The U-curve model was not supported for the time intervals of the study.

Nguyen and von Eye (2002) contrasted bipolar and bidimensional acculturation models and scales. They surveyed 191 Vietnamese students utilizing a bidimensional scale. The study supported the value of viewing acculturation from a two-dimensional framework both from a theoretical perspective and scale results. The scale demonstrated strong validity and reliability.

In a study of 144 Soviet Jewish refugee adolescents in the U.S., Birman and Trickett's (2001) adopted an "orthogonal" (multidimensional) view of adaptation with the acculturation dimensions of behavior, language, and identity. They looked at acculturation in relation to age of arrival and length of time in the country as well as the gap between parents and adolescents. Acculturation appeared to occur in a linear pattern over time with acculturation to the American culture increasing while decreasing for the Russian culture. Surprisingly to the researchers, adolescents identified more with Russian culture than their parents. Birman, Tirckett and Vinokurov (2002) explored the relationship between acculturation and adaptation across different life experiences for 162 Soviet Jewish refugee adolescents. Their multidimensional model examined three aspects of acculturation: language, behavioral participation, and identification and how they impact adjustment in different areas of life (school, friends, home). The study failed to identify a best acculturative style. The structural demands for American/Russian culture determine the value of American/Russian acculturation. A positive correlation was found between extent of American acculturation and positive school adaptation.

Oh, Koeske and Sales (2002) examined the relationship between acculturation, stress and depressive symptoms among Korean immigrants (157). They found a positive relationship between acculturation and acculturative stress. Acculturation was associated with depression due to one's eroding sense of

identity.

Communication and Acculturation Studies

Some researchers, notably Young Kim, have examined the role of communication in the acculturation process. Nagata (1969) investigated several communication variables in his study of Japanese Niseis and Sanseis in Chicago. Among the variables were: host and ethnic mass media consumption; correspondence and daily telephone conversations with American and ethnic friends; the potential for interpersonal interactions; social gatherings; association membership; ethnic composition in the neighborhood; and, aspiration to speak better Japanese. Nagata concluded that there is a progressive increase in degrees of communication participation by immigrants in the host society. The study's limitation is that only media exposure and subscription to ethnic press are independent variables. Therefore, the research has limited value to the question of how communication behaviors directly facilitate acculturation. The question of what acculturation does to communication is addressed, but not what communication does to acculturation (J. Kim, 1980).

The predominant communication researcher in acculturation has been Young Kim. Kim (1976) attempted a systematic effort to provide a theoretical explanation for the communication behaviors of immigrants. Kim used language fluency, interaction potential, acculturation motivation, and mass media availability as independent variables and interpersonal communication and mass media consumption as the dependent variables. Kim then proposed a path model to investigate a causal relationship between intercultural communication patterns and perceptual complexity. The major conclusions of this research were: (1) acculturation motivation, language fluency, and interpersonal and mass media channel accessibility are major causal factors of an immigrant's intercultural communication behavior; (2) the four independent variables do not affect one's cognitive complexity directly, but are mediated by one's interpersonal and mass communication experiences in the host society; (3) the influence of interpersonal communication exceeds that of mass media usage in developing a complex cognitive system in perceiving the host society; and, (4) educational background, sex, time among the host society, and age at the time of immigration are the key determinants of one's language competence, acculturation motivation, and accessibility to host communication channels (Kim, 1977.

In another report of her research among Koreans in Chicago, Kim (1978) reported an overall linear trend in the immigrant's interethnic communication with Americans and cognitive complexity in perceiving the American society. The immigrant's interpersonal communication with Americans and Koreans increased simultaneously. Also, the immigrant's ethnic media consumption rapidly declined over the years in contrast to American media usage. Kim (1978) asserts that interpersonal communication is a stronger source of cultural learning

in the new host society than mass media.

Institutional completeness, that is, the number and strength of ethnic institutions, is an important influence upon an immigrant's ethnic involvement. Y. Kim (1976, 1977) reported a high degree of ethnic involvement among immigrant Koreans in Chicago. Inglis and Gudykunst (1982) replicated Kim's study among Korean immigrants in Hartford, Connecticut, and reported a significant difference between the two groups in the overall size of ethnic ties. The degree of ethnic involvement of the Hartford immigrants (an area with a lower level of institutional completeness) was found to be significantly lower than that of the Chicago immigrants (an area with a higher level of institutional completeness).

Based on Kim's extensive research, an interactive theory of communication and acculturation was proposed based on a systems orientation (Kim, 1979). A shortcoming in acculturation research has been its "monistic" conceptualization of the acculturation process. From this vantage point, the focal point of acculturation has been the change of the immigrant who assimilates into the culture of the host society. This approach overlooks the interactive nature of the acculturation process. As Kim suggests, "...communication and acculturation occur in and through the interlocking interaction process of 'push' and 'pull' in the relationship between an immigrant and his new sociocultural surroundings" (p. 437). In reality, the validation of acculturation ultimately occurs in the host society.

Kim (1979) suggests that humans, as an open system, show the quality of adaptation. Immigrants successfully acculturate themselves to the degree that they learn to code and decode messages in a way that they will be recognized, accepted, and responded to by the individual or group with which they interact. Kim suggests that "we may conceive of immigrants operating much like radar sets in so far as they are continually sending out impulses which then come back to illuminate and define the cultural-social world for them" (p. 440).

Central to an interactive theory, Kim (1979) described key constructs of communication that are considered the most relevant and essential elements of the communication-acculturation process of an immigrant. Key aspects are: interpersonal communication, mass media behavior, and communication environment. Additional subconstructs are: cognitive structure, image of self/others, motivation for acculturation, knowledge of host language, interpersonal relationship, mutuality of interpersonal perception, quantity of media use, choice of media content, interaction potential, and mass media availability.

Another area crucial to the acculturation process is the immigrant's personal network. Y. Kim (1986, 1987) describes network characteristics–network heterogeneity, the strength of native ties, and the centrality of native ties, as useful conceptualizations facilitating the study of the immigrant's host communication competence. The higher the level of inclusion of non-ethnic individuals in an

immigrant's personal network, the higher is the level of host communication competence. Additionally, the strength of the immigrant's ties with the natives is associated closely with the degree of centrality in the immigrant's personal network, host communication competence is correspondingly higher. It is apparent that the nature of one's personal network reflects as well as influences his or her overall host communication competence.

Jin Kim (1980) built upon the foundation of Y. Kim, but concluded that her path model did not make the final linkage between perceptual complexity and acculturation level. J. Kim (1980) argued that Young Kim's model lacked a key element of influence–"the effect of ethnically oriented communication variables which have been repeatedly theorized to be interaction with intercultural communication behaviors in determining acculturation level" (p. 157). J. Kim, therefore, attempted to test a causal model which attempts to explain different acculturation levels in terms of the communication properties linked with three sociological variables, namely, occupational status, ethnic network, and unit of settlement (single, family). The results generally indicated that intercultural and ethnic communication activities mediated significant portions of the effects of the three exogenous variables on an immigrant's acculturation level. The facilitating effect of intercultural communication and debilitating effect of ethnic communication were more noticeable in the advanced stage of immigration.

Young Kim (1988, 2001) invested the most effort toward development of an integrated model of cultural adaptation. She emphasizes a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic model that features the cyclic tension of constantly moving forward and drawing back in adaptation growth. Her model features the concepts of deculturation, acculturation, and assimilation. Deculturation is the unlearning of at least some of one's past cultural elements. Acculturation involves acquiring and learning some of the new cultural practices, responding at least partially to the pressure of the dominant culture. Assimilation represents the "state of the highest degree of acculturation into the host milieu and deculturation of the original cultural habits" (p. 52). Kim contends that complete assimilation is rare due to slow changes in core values. Her model of cultural adaptation includes such dynamic variables as: personal (or intrapersonal) and social communication and communication environment. Personal communication variables include cognitive structure, knowledge, image of self/others, and acculturation motivation. Social communication includes interpersonal and mass communication variables. Y. Kim (1987) summarizes: "Adaptation, then, can be viewed as a process of individual transformation toward and increasing level of host communication competence and of social integration in the host society." Immigrant mass communication usage facilitates acculturation by expanding one's knowledge about the broader ranges of the host culture, expanding the immigrant's experiences. In the initial phase of an immigrant's acculturation process, mass media play a particularly significant role enabling the immigrant to

absorb elements of the host society relatively pressure-free.

Communication environment is a significant determinant of acculturation, strongly linked with personal and social communication. Strong immigrant involvement with one's native ethnic community helps the acculturation process in the beginning, but may retard acculturation in the long run, depending on the immigrant's intensity of communication with members of the host society.

Underlying an immigrant's acculturation is the communication process. Future acculturation research needs to follow Young Kim's (1988, 2001) lead in examining key communication variables in the acculturation process such as personal (or intrapersonal) communication, social communication, and communication environment.

This article has examined acculturation research with a concluding focus on the vital link between communication and acculturation. Every immigrant is acculturated into the new host society through communication. Much of the acculturation process is adapting to and adopting central rules and patterns of communication of the host culture. The immigrant's communication competence facilitates all other aspects of adjustment in the host environment. Communication, then, is understood as the major underlying process as well as an outcome of the acculturation process.

Perhaps Gudykunst and Y. Kim (1984) best summarize communication and acculturation:

> At the heart of the interactive acculturation process lies the communication process linking strangers to the host cultural milieu. Acquisition of communicative competence by strangers is not only instrumental to all aspects of cultural adaptation but also indicative of the strangers' accomplished acculturation. In other words, the degree to which strangers adapt to the host culture depends on their personal and social communication processes. At the same time, the adaptive changes that have already taken place are reflected in the strangers' communication patterns (p. 220).

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