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The Concept of Acculturation and its Policy Implications. Extended abstract¹

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to reflect on the concept of acculturation and the policy implications of the acculturation processes. The paper will include the critical examination of the concept of acculturation, referring also to the qualitative research conducted among young Polish migrants in the United Kingdom. The paper will also address the challenges connected with integration policies.

The concept of acculturation

While defining the concept of acculturation, I would refer to works of cross-cultural psychologists.

John Berry in his work, 'Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures' defines acculturation as „the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (2005, p. 698), and explains that it involves changes both at the group and the individual level, and „various forms of mutual accommodation” (2005, p. 699). Berry emphasises the reciprocal “nature of acculturation”, by saying “everyone is involved, and everyone is doing it” (2005, p. 700).

Figure 1. Acculturation strategies

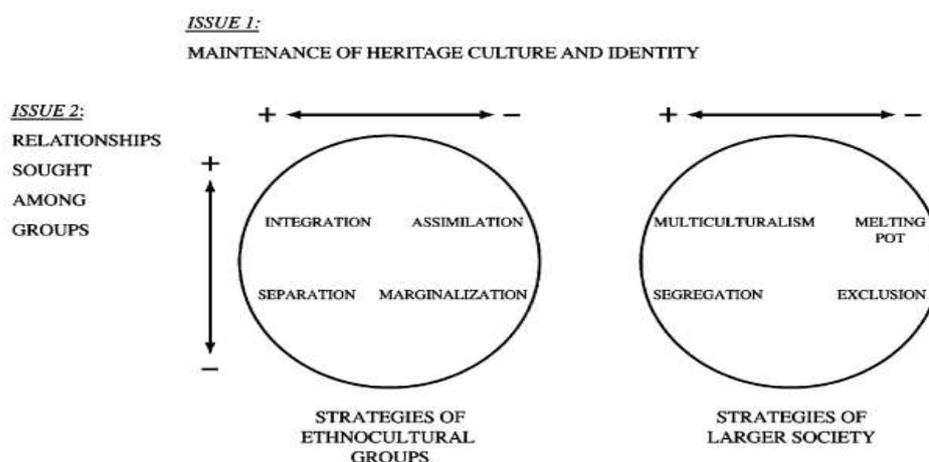


Fig. 3. Four acculturation strategies based upon two issues, in ethnocultural groups, and the larger society.

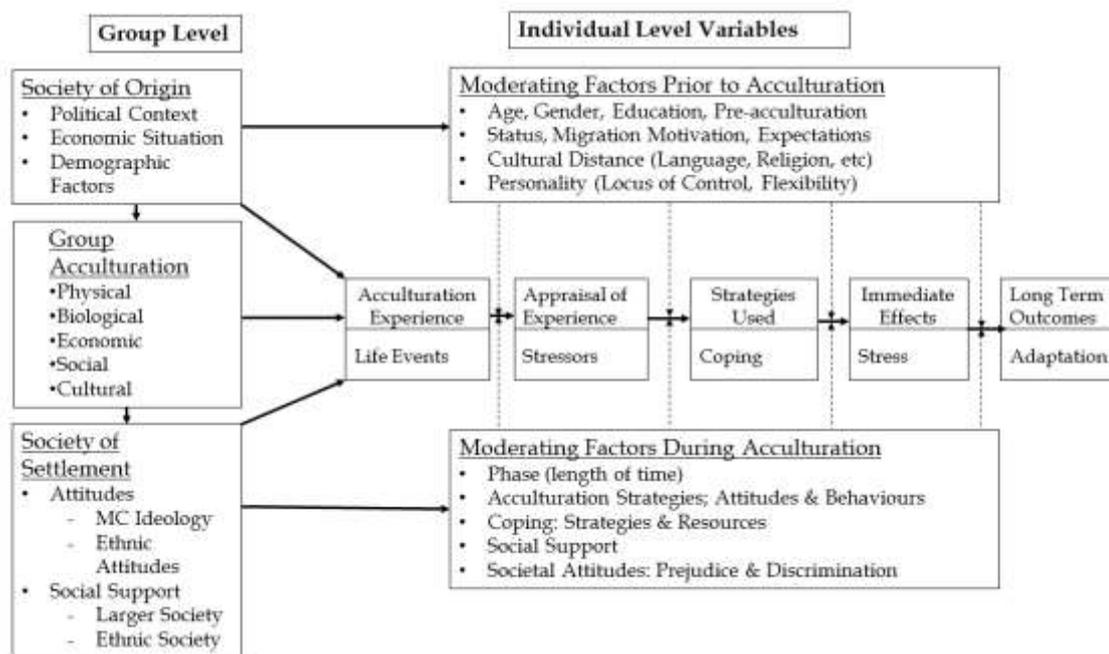
Source: (Berry, 2005, p. 705)

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He then proceeds to define and describe basic acculturation strategies (see the figure above), based on “orientations towards one’s own group and those towards other groups” (Berry, 2005, p. 704). Although Berry acknowledges that strategies are composed of two distinct components, i.e. attitudes and behaviours, and that policies present in the state of settlement do influence the choices made by the individual members of the non-dominant groups, the model we are presented with is in fact quite simple. The choices are displayed along two axes, the first representing “a relative preference for maintaining one’s heritage culture and identity”, the second referring to “a relative preference for having contact with and participating in the larger society along with other ethnocultural groups” (Berry, 2005, p. 704).

When quoting Berry, it seems useful to refer also to another model of his, which illustrates the framework for acculturation research (see the figure below), as this model includes the sociopolitical factors connected to the particularities of the societies of origin and settlement. It also covers the individual factors influencing the acculturation processes.

Figure 2. A framework for acculturation research



Source: (Berry, 1997, p. 15)

The model presented differentiates between factors on the group- or cultural-level and ones related to the individual, thus happening more on a psychological level. The model also in a way illustrates the journey taken by a migrant (from top to bottom) as it starts (along the top) with factors which “exist prior to acculturation taking place” (Berry, 1997, p. 14). It is well worth noting that firstly, this model seems to be tailored to analyse acculturation processes linked to migration phenomena (more than relations between established minority groups). Secondly, Berry uses this model to illustrate the point he is making, i.e there exist several “key variables that should be attended to when carrying out studies of psychological acculturation” (1997, p. 15), thus emphasising the importance of cultural contexts².

² What might seem peculiar given that Berry’s model has been accused of being in fact „acultural” (Boski, 2010, p. 113)

Berry’s model continues to influence new cohorts of researchers, yet there have been several attempts to modify or criticize it (Boski, 2010; Navas et al., 2005). What seems to be particularly useful as far as this paper is concerned is the set of modifications suggested by the group of researchers – authors of the Relative Acculturation Extended Model (RAEM) (Navas et al., 2005). Apart from other changes and suggestions, one particularly valuable was “the consideration of various domains of sociocultural reality” (Navas et al., 2005, p. 26) in which different acculturation strategies might take place.

Figure 3. Acculturation processes in different domains

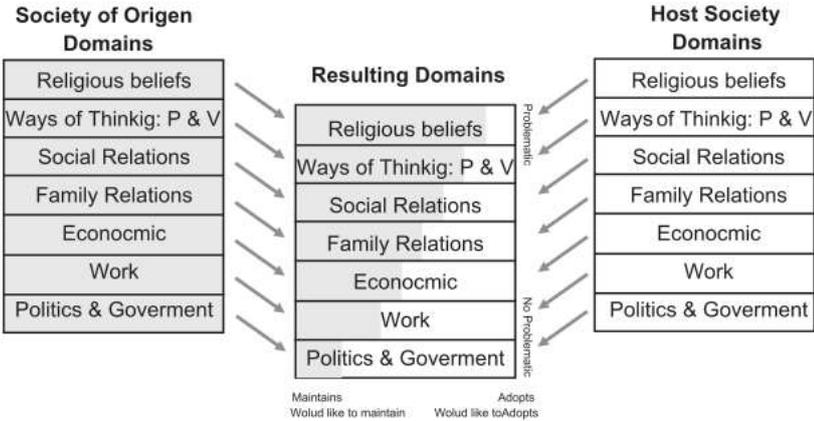


Fig. 2. Acculturation process of immigrants as relative adaptation between the origin society and host society in different domains.

Source: (Navas et al., 2005, p. 28)

Research on acculturation strategies adopted by young migrants

It seems crucial to see how these models resonate with the experience of migrants. The literature review on acculturation research supports a non-linear perspective on acculturation and adaptation processes (Berry, 2005, p. 707; Navas et al., 2005, pp. 23–24). However, when doing research on cultural phenomena one is always faced with a hitherto mentioned challenge – how to operationalize them in a meaningful yet culturally sensitive pattern. The team of researchers led among others by Berry himself undertook a huge endeavour of collecting data on acculturation processes among immigrant youth, with quantitative research conducted in 13 countries, with thousands participants³. The project theoretical framework was based on modified Berry’s model of four acculturation strategies including additional variables such as cultural ethnicity or language skills. Still, such an impressive piece of work, encompassing sophisticated statistical computations, leaves one to wonder how to incorporate into the research framework the issue of cultural contexts.

Exploratory qualitative research conducted among young Polish migrants helped identify strengths and weaknesses of Berry’s model of four acculturation strategies (Kuřakowska, 2016).

³ For the description of the project and its results see: (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006)

While it seemed easy to recognize and classify strategies as ‘integration’ or ‘separation’, these classifications did not prove significant unless the various domains of acculturation were considered. The further difficulty was linked to the fact that – while Berry talks about the possible interactions between more than two ethnocultural groups (Berry, 2005, p. 698) – his model is mostly based on the depiction of the cultural encounter(s) between two groups. The qualitative research among migrants shows however that other migrant minority communities are an extremely important reference point and play the role of the “significant other”.

Policy implications

The literature review seems to support the statement that the integration strategies are the most functional ones, characterized by the highest numbers of positive outcomes (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 2006). However, it is essential to note that the integration strategy becomes a meaningful possibility only in states and societies where dominant groups are willing to adopt a multicultural ideology (in other words, create a space for maintaining the minority cultures as well as possibilities for non-dominant groups to participate in mainstream culture). In that context, it is again well worth noting that minority groups might be interested in participating only in certain domains (e.g. economic or work-related), so it is crucial to consider them while conducting further research on acculturation strategies.

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