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Berry in Legoland

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Commentary on “Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation”
by John W. Berry

In the lead article, the author suggests a ground-breaking theoretical model for studying and explaining the processes of acculturation and adaptation experienced by immigrants in receptor countries. Through this model the author brings much needed attention to a growing worldwide phenomenon.

The theoretical model used by the author to explain migration and the process of acculturation and adaptation is vast and embraces several

different levels of analysis, including the macrosocial, group, and individual levels. The model further includes moderating factors in the process.

His discussion of strategies for specific and directive explanations and analysis is comprehensive and far-reaching. However, one potential limitation of the theoretical model presented is that each part fits perfectly within the other parts in a functional relationship, like the pieces of a *Lego* structure, resulting in a model that is closed to the inevitable diversity of variables involved in such a diverse area of study as immigration. The structure he builds leaves no room for flexibility. The model does not allow for new situations, groups, and social actors that will make up a universe of particular meanings.

Immigrant populations are fractured, transitory, and diverse—it is impossible to generalise to the entire population, even with the current urgent need for measures to address problems such as AIDS and discrimination, among others. These phenomena cannot be considered apart from issues such as acculturation and adaptation in diverse immigrant populations, without losing sight of the specificity these questions take on in different contexts, situations, and individual social actors.

For that reason, it is important to complement global or macro theoretical models with micro-theories capable of locating and explaining the patterns of specific groups while taking into account the transitory nature of the phenomena. Through the creation of micro-theories it would be possible to see “reality” from different perspectives and foci, widening the understanding of the realities of groups of specific interest.

Therefore, in this commentary, we propose an approach consisting of several strategies to increase the flexibility of the study of acculturation and adaptation among immigrant populations.

CONCEPT OF THE SOCIAL ACTOR

The inclusion of the migrants themselves as actors who live and interpret their own reality would enhance the study and discussion of the adaptation and acculturation process. The concept of an actor is a central element in the sociology of symbols and meanings. Importance is given to the formal characteristics of the structure, but also the specific way the actors’ perceptions—of the self and of social relations—are modified as they operate within that structure (Ortner & Whitehead, 1996).

The inclusion of the social actor seeks to explain the processes by which people describe, explain, or understand the world they live in, recognising their role in the creation and existence of social phenomena.

One example of this focus involves the transition from adolescence to adulthood in residents of certain areas of Mexico who migrate to the United States. Some groups from Puebla and Oaxaca identify the passage from

adolescence to adulthood in the precise moment of migration, regardless of age. In this case the concept of adolescence has no direct relationship with age, but is linked to migration activity. This has important implications for understanding how migrants relate to the receptor country and what distinct traits will characterise both their group and individual behaviour.

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP LEVEL

The theoretical model presented by John Berry describes processes from the general (social) to the specific (individual). It is also important, however, to analyse the role of individual actions—as reflected in the daily life of the subjects—on group and social situations that develop. Although it is true that the structure of the migrants' societies of origin can influence the individual expressions of the subjects, it is equally certain that the subjects can generate changes in their societies of origin.

For this reason, when discussing protective factors for the mental health of migrants it is important to acknowledge the impact the social groups of origin have over the forms in which the subjects confront and manage the stressful situations provoked during acculturation.

For example, in a study of potential protective factors for the avoidance of drug use in the migrants' societies of origin and in the migrants themselves (Wagner et al., 1991), it was found that the presence of social cohesion and cultural identity function as protective factors. Knowing the protective factors at this group level permits another possible route both for the explanation of reality and for interventions that affect reality, beyond those that can be obtained by knowledge of individual protective factors.

APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORETICAL MODEL

One important aspect for consideration in any theory is the degree of applicability to concrete situations. It is worth mentioning the argument made by Schönflug (1993), which maintains that applied psychology as practised in clinics and organisations has developed in a parallel fashion to basic psychology rather than derived directly from it.

In this sense, the test of the theoretical model presented by the author will be its degree of applicability in the study of current problems and phenomena with migrant populations.

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Acculturation: Adaptation or Development?

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Commentary on “Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation”
by John W. Berry

John Berry’s conceptualisations of acculturation are theoretically relevant yet mainly taxonomic, defining four acculturation outcomes of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. These are supplemented by a process model of acculturation adhering basically to the following stress-coping paradigm: experiences or life events associated with migration are evaluated as stressors and may be dealt with by employing various coping strategies. Immediate effects of stressors when not coped with effectively may be a state of stress that leads to long-term changes or adaptations. Berry’s model includes a considerable collection of background and moderating variables that may influence the stressor–coping–stress–adaptation process at any time. The long-term outcome *adaptation* is not necessarily adjustment but may involve critical states and resistance to the pressure of assimilation in the host society.¹

The two points I wish to raise in my commentary are: (1) acculturation as development—introducing a developmental perspective into theoretical thinking in the domain of acculturation research; and (2) acculturation as identity change—a plea for the inclusion of identity changes into the process model of acculturation.

ACCULTURATION AS DEVELOPMENT

The theoretical approach Berry takes is to construct a “process” model of acculturation utilising the stress-coping paradigm of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). There are two problems associated with this line of thinking: one is

¹ Berry suggests a further way of conceptualising *psychological acculturation*: learning in the forms of culture learning, behavioural shifts, or social skill acquisition. But he does not further pursue this line of thinking.