



## Assimilation and individual differences in emotion: The dynamics of anger and approach motivation

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### ABSTRACT

Individuals who cross cultural boundaries face many challenges when trying to adapt to a receiving culture. Adaptation challenges such as learning to maneuver across societal domains may become increasingly complex if structural level factors such as discrimination are present. Researchers have conceptualized acculturation as a relatively autonomous decision indicating that four acculturation strategies exist: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Moreover, researchers have also long debated the link between acculturation strategy, adaptation hassles and negative health outcomes. However, models seeking to explain how individual difference and structural level variables may influence each other and subsequently influence acculturation and adaptation are needed. The purpose of this study is to lay the foundation for the conceptualization of such a model. We propose that temperamental predispositions to negative emotionality, anger, and impulsivity may highlight discrimination which in turn may lead to increases in acculturative stress and negative markers of psychosocial well-being. We used SEM to test our hypothesized model. Results supported a modified model. Implications for the measurement of adaptation and design of interventions are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Individuals who venture to cross language and culture boundaries expose themselves to alternate ways of living and thinking triggering changes in the conceptualization of the self (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). This process has been termed acculturation and change entails learning new behaviors, values, and beliefs of the receiving culture. Research has shown that individuals choose among four main acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization (Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989). Assimilation refers to the immigrant's decision to supplant behaviors and beliefs from the heritage culture with ones from the receiving culture. Integration refers to the decision to accommodate both cultures. Separation refers to the rejection of the receiving culture's behaviors and beliefs, while retaining the ones from the heritage culture. Marginalization refers to the rejection of both cultures. Capturing the four acculturation patterns requires that the assessment of affiliation to the receiving and heritage cultures be conducted separately. This choice of measurement implicates that affiliation to host and heritage cultures are orthogonal constructs. Assessment of the four acculturation strategies is fraught with controversies (Chirkov, 2009). First, there is variability in research findings regarding the purported orthogonality. Research sometimes unveils an inverse correlation, albeit small, between affiliations to host and heritage cultures which may indicate a preference for assimilation or separation (see Costigan and Su, 2004; Flannery,

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Reise, & Yu, 2001; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). Second, although the acculturation literature unquestionably indicates that when individuals are asked to convey their acculturation preferences most indicate a preference for integration or separation (Sam & Berry, 2006), preferences for integration may reflect the normative discourse in the host society (i.e., what members of the host society believe and convey) and thus may not accurately reflect the actual acculturation process (Safdar, Struthers, & van Oudenhoven, 2009).

Researchers have attempted to capture the complex notion of the process of culture change by indicating that factors outside of an individual's control exert a strong influence on the selection of an acculturation strategy such as attitudes towards the ethnic minority group held by members of the majority group (Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault, & Senechal, 1997) and availability of psychological resources related to coping (Safdar et al., 2009). However, notably absent from these models is the notion that an individual's choice of acculturation strategy, and consequently adaptation to change, may also be linked to affective regulatory processes. Albert Bandura (1986) legendary social cognitive theory (SCT) proposed that at the heart of an individual's self-efficacy lies cognition and self-regulation and that these processes underpin successful adaptation. We posit that acculturation may also be a process that is governed by the interaction of individual differences in emotion and consequent reaction to environmental factors.

### 1.1. Individual and structural factors related to acculturation

The idea that individual difference factors influence the selection of an acculturation strategy is not new. Research indicates that both individual difference variables and structural factors facilitate or impinge acculturation strategies (Berry, 1980). Prior research has shown that individual difference variables such as personality (Ryder et al., 2000), self-efficacy (Ward & Kennedy, 1992), and need for cognitive closure (Kosic, 2002) influence the selection of an acculturation strategy. For example, extraversion, a sense of self-efficacy, and low tolerance for ambiguity predict a preference for assimilation while low socioeconomic status predicts a preference for other acculturation strategies (Berry, 1980).

Our study was inspired by Padilla and Perez (2003) who suggest a socio-cognitive approach to the study of acculturation. The study of acculturation, in their view, has suffered from a static view of intergroup relations and an insufficient account of contextual determinants such as discrimination. According to Padilla and Perez (2003), intergroup relations are dynamic and in constant change meaning that the level of stigmatization for a particular minority group is in constant flux. The extent to which members of the host culture stigmatize ethnic minorities and the extent to which individuals are aware of the stigmatization will influence acculturation. This idea suggests that acculturation is a dynamic process responsive to situational factors. We would like to add to this model the thesis that temperamental predispositions may also influence the salience of and reaction to stressors such as discrimination and consequently selection of an acculturation strategy. This is an important thesis given the link between acculturation and adaptation.

### 1.2. Acculturation and adaptation

Researchers have been concerned with the psychosocial adaptation of individuals undergoing the process of culture change (Moyerman & Forman, 1992). The study of the relationship between acculturation and adaptation is understandably important since maladjustment can result in considerable societal costs. For example, empirical findings suggest a relationship between maladjustment and negative mental health outcomes (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991).

Acculturation and adaptation are linked by the experience of "acculturative stress" (Smart & Smart, 1995). Acculturative stress results from the complex challenges that individuals face when entering a new culture. These challenges range from learning a new language to being able to successfully maneuver in the social, institutional and economic layers that constitute the fabric of society (Organista, Organista, & Kurasaki, 2002). Acculturative stress is thus a form of psychological stress created from "culture shock" and results in decreased markers of mental health and well-being such as, reduced physical health, erratic decision-making, and occupational malfunctioning (Smart & Smart, 1995). Prior models have shown that individual difference variables related to the ability to cope with the process of culture change such as psychosocial well-being, perceptions of cultural competence, and social support are related to acculturation preferences (Safdar, Lay, & Struthers, 2003). However, a model linking individual differences in temperament to the process of adaptation and selection of an acculturation strategy has not been specified.

The purpose of this study is to begin the process of delineating such a model by investigating the role that processes related to the regulation of behavior and affect have on the experience of culture related stressors and markers of well-being. Research aimed at delineating such a model is important given that researchers question the importance of studying the influence of acculturation on the health status and well-being of ethnic minorities undergoing the process of culture change (Hunt, Schneider, & Comer, 2004). Thus, it is imperative to uncover the role that other important individual difference variables such as affect may bear on an individual's selection of acculturation strategy and experience of acculturative stress.

### 1.3. Temperament and adaptation

Research on affect regulation has focused primarily on individuals' direct affective responses to stressors or aversive events. However, it is possible that greater predisposition to certain emotions also increases exposure to aversive events

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