Summary of the criticism and of the potential ways to improve acculturation psychology

Valery Chirkov *

University of Saskatchewan, Department of Psychology, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N5A5

A B S T R A C T

The conclusion to this issue is comprised by the summary of the critical points regarding modern acculturation psychology addressed by the authors of this issue followed by the suggestions for the improvement of this branch of psychology. The emergence of cultural acculturation psychology is proposed.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Based on the reflections and opinions presented in this issue, the state of affairs in modern acculturation psychology looks pretty pessimistic: the existing approach to acculturation is epistemologically, conceptually, and methodologically unsatisfactory; it does not meet the complexity of this phenomenon and does not bring useful and practical results to immigrants' communities.

Below, I summarize the major concerns with acculturation psychology that were expressed by the authors of this issue. This summary is followed by suggestions to improve this dire situation. Some of these suggestions could be seen as potential propositions of an emerging cultural acculturation psychology. (Contributors to the critique and suggestions are acknowledged in the parentheses; if there is more than one contributor, they are listed in an alphabetical order.)

Major points of criticism

A. Problems with the definition of acculturation
- A.1. The process of acculturation is ill-defined and the existing definition is helpless to provide psychologists with elaborated guidelines to study acculturation based on uncovering its symbolic, social, linguistic, and psychological aspects (Chirkov; Rudmin);
- A.2. The existing definition is taken from outdated anthropological literature (Chirkov; Rudmin);
- A.3. This definition addresses the phenomena on a group level. When working on this level acculturation psychologists identify various collective acculturation attitudes of acculturating groups and try to address the consequences of these attitudes on people's health, well-being, and performance. This is a sociological type of approach which lacks representative and reliable sampling (Chirkov; Rudmin);
- A.4. There is widespread terminological confusion of the terms *integration, assimilation* and some others in their relations with the term *acculturation* across historical periods and different research communities (Bhatia & Ram; Weinreich).

---

* Tel.: +1 306 966 6529 (Business); fax: +1 306 966 6630.
  E-mail address: v.chirkov@usask.ca.

B. Problems with understanding the nature of the acculturation process: the deficiency of its modern conceptual framing
  B.1. Acculturation is often simplistically seen as a form of a linear adaptation: the more acculturated individuals are the healthier and more successful they become (Rudmin);
  B.2. Acculturation is often reduced to a stress-like phenomenon that deteriorates the mental health of acculturating minorities (Rudmin);
  B.3. The paradox of acculturation–when acculturating individuals are healthier and more successful than the majority of the population, and their acculturation leads to the deterioration of both health and performance–is to the most parts ignored (Rudmin);
  B.4. The understanding of acculturation as a process that could promote personal growth, individual development and family relations is not addressed (Rudmin, Tardif-Williams & Fisher);
  B.5. Studies of acculturation rely on the unsupported assumption that acculturation has universal regularities that are independent of time, place, and people involved (Bhatia & Ram; Chirkov; Cresswell; Rudmin; Tardif-Williams & Fisher; Weinreich);
  B.6. The process of acculturation in the majority of studies is unrealistically understood as individuals' rational choice among four fixed acculturation strategies. The assumptions underlying this understanding that no cultures have antagonistic or incompatible cultural aspirations between them, and that acculturating individuals are capable of choosing among acculturating strategies and holding on to the chosen strategies for a long period of time were found unsupported (Bhatia & Ram; Weinreich);
  B.7. Acculturation research, particularly the psychometric ones, tends to ignore the historical, political, and social circumstances of the acculturating individuals and their communities. This makes acculturation appear to happen in a contextual vacuum (Bhatia & Ram; Chirkov; Weinreich);
  B.8. Contemporary acculturation psychology tends to ignore the concept of culture. That is, research papers lack definitions and theories of culture as it relates to acculturation. Most psychometric measures focus on surface behaviors that are open to code switching, like language, cuisine, fashions, and other preferences, while ignoring deep meaning-generating aspects of culture (Bhatia & Ram; Chirkov; Tardif-Williams & Fisher).
C. Epistemological problems of acculturation research
  C.1. Acculturation studies are based on the unsupported assumption that acculturation can be studied as any natural process by looking for probabilistic regularities and testing them using the logic of hypothetico-deductive reasoning (Chirkov);
  C.2. The ultimate goal of finding and using these regularities is to explain and predict particular outcomes of acculturation (Chirkov);
  C.3. Many psychometric studies of acculturation neglect the interactive nature of acculturation process by assigning responsibility for its success predominantly to the minority groups' acculturation strategies. (There are some variations of this assumption related to the role of the host communities' attitudes in the process of adaptation.) (Rudmin; Weinreich).
D. Methodological problems of acculturation studies
  D.1. In accord with the naturalistic paradigm, acculturation and related constructs are operationalized through standardized scales which provide precise measurements of the phenomena under investigation. Standardized surveys followed by rigorous statistical analysis are the primary way to study acculturation. (Some authors of the present issue support this thesis, whereas others criticize it.) (Chirkov);
  D.2. The role of language as an active, constructive, and meaning-producing mean of organizing people's lives and experiences is ignored (Chirkov; Creswell);
  D.3. Acculturation is not studied as a process that unfolds in time; acculturation research is dominated by a cross-sectional design at the expense a longitudinal one (Chirkov).
E. Problems with the application of the mainstream acculturation research
  E.1. Modern acculturation research has no or very little practical utility for immigrant communities and immigrant-assisting agencies (Chirkov; Rudmin).

Suggestions to improve research in acculturation psychology

a. A definition of acculturation and terminological suggestions
  a.1. One possible option was suggested: *"Individual* **acculturation** *(in contrast to group acculturation) is a process that is* <u>executed by</u> *an agentic individual (it is not a process that* <u>happens to</u> *an individual) after meeting and entering a cultural community that is different from the cultural community where he or she was initially socialized. Acculturation involves a deliberate, reflective, and, for the most part, comparative cognitive activity of understanding the frame of references and meanings with regard to the world, others, and self that exist in one's 'home' cultural community and which one has discovered in a new cultural community. This process emerges within the context of interactions, both physical and symbolic, with the members of the 'home' and new cultural communities. Acculturation is an open-ended, continuous process that includes progresses, relapses, and turns which make it practically impossible to predict and control. This process should be described, interpreted, and understand by the researchers"* (Chirkov, current issue, footnote 1);