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Critical psychology of acculturation: What do we study and how do we study it, when we investigate acculturation?

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ABSTRACT

Author presents critical analyses of the philosophy and methodology of the current research in the psychology of acculturation. He defends three theses. First, that the dominant mode of research in the psychology of acculturation does not correspond to the essential qualities of the phenomenon under scrutiny—the acculturation process. Acculturation researchers have been trying to apply a positivistic and quantitative approach to a phenomenon that is far beyond the capacity this approach has to comprehend it. Second, that there is no culture in acculturation research and the researchers do not even have working models of culture that could guide research in this area. Third, that the complex nature of the acculturation process requires very diverse thinking about the subject, an application of various epistemological and methodological approaches, inter- and multi-disciplinarity, intellectual flexibility, and the willingness to critically analyse achieved results and obtained knowledge. Unfortunately, all these capacities and attributes are yet scarce in the discourse of the psychology of acculturation. The presentation of the arguments is structured in three sections. First, the author presents a philosophical framework suitable for analysing both the current and future models of acculturation research. Then, he reports the results of the analysis of 42 articles on acculturation which is followed by conclusions and implications derived from this analysis. In the third section, the author provides an example and formulates suggestions for future acculturation research.

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The psychology of acculturation is an intensively expanding field of studies within cross-cultural psychology and the psychology of intercultural relations¹. Current publications of the Handbook of Acculturation Psychology, several edited monographs and a growing number of empirical studies on acculturation strongly support this claim (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Bhatia, 2007; Booth, Crouter, & Landale, 1997; Bornstein & Cote, 2006; Castro, 2003; Chun, Organista, & Marin, 2002; Deaux, 2006; Kagitcibasi, 2007; Kim, 2001; Mahalingam, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rudmin, 2003; Rumbaut &

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¹ I differentiate sharply between the studies of the acculturation process and the research on immigrant adjustments. To me the psychology of acculturation is primarily concern with studying the process of acculturation. Individual **acculturation** (in contrast to group acculturation) is a process that is *executed* by an agentic individual (it is not a process that *happens to* 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. The studies on immigration adaptation are more oriented toward descriptive multidisciplinary (including sociological, economical, and political sciences) investigations of how migrants adjust to and function in a new environment, with regard to their social status, economic prosperity, education, health and psychological well-being, and what variables predict their successful functioning. Although these two streams of research may be intertwined, for the purpose of this article I keep them strictly separate.

Portes, 2001; Sam & Berry, 2006; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003; Ward, 2001; Ward, Bocher, & Furnham, 2001).

Research on acculturation has an important theoretical and practical significance for social sciences and social policy development. The acculturation process at the level of individuals constitutes a natural laboratory for studying the crucial questions of modern social cross-cultural and cultural psychology, cultural anthropology, and sociology: What role does culture play in people social functioning? Do cultural and social factors predetermine the actions of individuals or do people have their own 'say' in organizing their activities and, finally, in shaping and moulding their cultural and social environments? What are relations between culture and people's agency? These are fundamental questions of social theory and social philosophy. The process of acculturation, when people were initially socialized in one cultural environment and then moved and started functioning in another one, offers an opportunity to research these quintessential questions of the interaction of agentic individuals with constraining and controlling social and cultural demands. Consequently, acculturation research could contribute significantly to the development of comprehensive account of "social structure/culture versus agency" problem relevant to many social and human sciences.

Research in the psychology of acculturation is very important for policy makers as well as for different organizations working with refugee and immigrant families in helping them adjust to a new life in the immigrant-accepting countries (Carmon, 1996; Esses, Dovidio, & Dion, 2002). Immigration and acculturation research was not a mainstream topic for cross-cultural psychology in the last century, but ignoring acculturation issues or addressing them superficially in the current age may have tremendous costs—political, economical and socio-psychological. Acculturation research should provide policy makers with a rich set of data about the mechanisms, dynamics, and conditions that either support or hinder the process of successful integration into a new life where acculturation plays a fundamental role.

In order to be able to meet all these high expectations, to be at the edge of the modern theoretical debate in the social sciences and to inform applied and policy-making processes, acculturation psychologists, should be critical and reflective regarding what, how, and why they are doing every aspect of their research while conducting acculturation studies; they must be theoretically and philosophically knowledgeable and flexible enough to provide a deep and valid account of the issue under scrutiny.

Thus, the goal of this article is to provide a critical analysis of the current trend in research of acculturation both on the conceptual and empirical levels and to provide a reflection of what our philosophical orientations, as well as epistemological and methodological positions, are and how adequate all of these positions are with regard to the nature of the phenomena we study. I want to emphasise strongly that I do not want to judge or criticize my fellow colleagues, as I am a part of the crowd; but I sincerely want to raise my voice of concern about the direction in which our science is moving and invite the research community to think through and discuss these concerns in a constructive and respectful manner.

I want to raise and defend three theses in this article. **First**, that the dominant mode of research in the psychology of acculturation does not correspond to the essential qualities of the phenomenon we study – the acculturation process – and this misfit may lead us to a stagnation and even crisis in our discipline. Acculturation researchers have been trying to apply a deductive-nomological and quantitative approach to a phenomenon of acculturation that is far beyond the capacity this approach has to comprehend it. My **second** thesis is that there is no attention given to culture in acculturation research and acculturation researchers do not even have a working model of culture that could guide their research in this area. And the **third** thesis is that the complex nature of the acculturation process requires very diverse thinking about the subject, an application of various epistemological and methodological approaches, multidisciplinary, intellectual flexibility, and the willingness to critically analyse achieved results and obtained knowledge. Unfortunately, all these capacities and attributes are yet scarce in the discourse of the psychology of acculturation.

The presentation of my arguments is structured in three sections. First, I will reconstruct and present a philosophical framework suitable for analysing both the current and future models of acculturation research. Then I will report some statistics on the analysis of 42 articles on acculturation which will be followed by conclusions and implications derived from this analysis. In the third section I will try to articulate some requirements for a more comprehensive study of acculturation as I see it.

1. Two systems of inquiry in acculturation psychology

1.1. *Explanation and understanding in social inquiry*

I believe that the majority of researchers will agree that the psychology of acculturation belongs to the social sciences where it aims, together with social and cross-cultural psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics and other disciplines, to study the relationships between society and the individual and to investigate the dynamics and mechanisms of the interactions between individuals' actions and societal structures. If we accept this assumption, then it is logical to apply the basic propositions held in the philosophy of social science to acculturation psychology and analyze the existing research on acculturation through the prism of these propositions. I do not try to provide a comprehensive account of this topic, but for the purpose of this article these basic propositions could be summarized around the following statements.

There are two basic modes of approaching the subject matter in the social sciences: **the mode of explanation** which is rooted in the deductive-nomological model of social sciences and **the mode of understanding**, rooted in traditions of 'interpretative' social sciences (Crotty, 1998; Cummins, 2000; Hollis, 2002; Mahajan, 1998; Manicas, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1983; Secord, 1986; von Wright, 1971).

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