Immigrants' Perceptions of Host Attitudes and Their Reconstruction of Cultural Groups

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Commentary on “Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation”

by John W. Berry

The acculturation of immigrants does not take place in a social vacuum; it occurs and unfolds itself within the context of intragroup and intergroup relations that provide at times the support and at times the challenge for the reconstruction of selves and identities. In his comprehensive and integrative review, John Berry points to the importance of contextual “societal” factors (subsumed under the “group-level” category in his acculturation framework) and their effects on individual adaptation. It is on an important component of this category of factors, namely the attitudes of the host (or majority) society towards immigrants and immigration, that I would like to elaborate in the first part of this commentary.

The examination of attitudes held by members of the majority culture towards acculturating groups has received relatively little empirical attention (Ward, 1996). It has been noted, however, that host attitudes can exert strong effects on immigrant adjustment. It is likely that public attitudes towards immigration affect policies dealing with the allocation of resources to newcomers. Berry refers to Murphy who suggested that societies supportive of cultural pluralism are more likely to provide social support...
both from the institutions of the larger society as well as from the minority groups into which the immigrants are integrated. Externally imposed acculturation seems also to have a deleterious impact on immigrants' health (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

It seems to me that a more differentiated look at these majority attitudes is needed in order to reach a deeper understanding of their effects on immigrants' acculturation and adaptation. First, the assessment of the host attitudes towards immigrants has to take into account variations within the majority society in the content, direction, and intensity of these attitudes. Studies conducted in Israel during the recent years of massive immigration from the former Soviet Union, for example, report an overall favourable approach among the receiving Israelis towards immigrants and immigration, but point to marked subgroup differences in these host attitudes (e.g. Israelowitz & Abu Saad, 1992; Shye & Duchin, 1990). As acculturation and adaptation are largely a result of daily and continuous communicational transactions between the immigrant and his or her social environment, these local fluctuations of host attitudes may strongly affect the newcomer's adjustment. Moreover, eventual discrepancies between such a general positive orientation of the majority society towards immigrants and the less favourable host attitudes prevailing within the immigrant's immediate social context may also be a factor contributing to the newcomer's distress; immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have to interact on a daily basis with those segments of the Israeli society that hold less favourable attitudes towards them may feel thus disoriented, disappointed, and frustrated.

A related important distinction concerns the various reference groups whose members' attitudes may have an impact on the immigrant acculturation and adaptation. Buriel (1975) suggested that Hispanics living in the United States may not be acculturating "to the majority", but instead they may be adopting the norms of their "barrio", a neighbourhood with a relatively high proportion of immigrants and minority members where some characteristics of the traditional Hispanic community are maintained. This notion should prompt us to examine acculturation patterns and acculturation strategies in a more differentiated way: immigrants may adopt distinct orientations towards the various subgroups of the society with which they are interacting. The assumption implicit in most acculturation frameworks (such as Berry's model), regarding a single monolithic majority society to which immigrants acculturate and about which they develop acculturation attitudes, may fail to take into account the social complexity of many modern societies. In a preliminary study conducted among immigrants from the former Soviet Union living in Israeli kibbutzim, for example, I found that assimilation attitudes towards the kibbutz and towards Israeli society were largely uncorrelated, suggesting that immigrants make clear
distinctions between their various "spheres of acculturation" and that they choose to which to assimilate more than to others. It is thus imperative to examine the attitudes of the members of these different subgroups within the larger majority society and their differential impact on the immigrant's acculturation and adaptation. In Buriel's Hispanic-American context, for example, immigrants who assign greater importance to their "acculturation to the majority" may be more responsive to, and affected by, the attitudes held by the majority (mostly Anglo) society, whereas immigrants whose major reference group is Hispanic might be more influenced by the attitudes towards immigration and acculturation prevalent in their "barrio".

We should also pay closer attention to the level at which host attitudes are being assessed and expressed. Findings from a large survey of attitudes (Bar-Tzuri & Hendels, 1992) indicate that the most widespread perception among Israelis assigned great importance to the ingathering of Jews in the State of Israel, and to the absorption of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Israeli society. On the other hand, the new immigrants were placed very low in the hierarchy of groups that deserve assistance from public funds, and the willingness of the respondents to make personal sacrifices for the absorption of immigrants was relatively low. This study exemplifies the inconsistencies that may characterise attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in pluralistic societies: behavioural tendencies (and also possibly actual behaviours) might fall behind the ideologically laden favourable attitudes expressed at the rhetorical level. This type of discrepancy may be conducive to disorientation and distress among immigrants, who may base their expectations for treatment and acceptance by the receiving majority on the more favourable "ideological" attitudes rather than on the daily behaviour of members in their host environment.

My central argument here stresses the complexity and variability of host attitudes towards immigrants, but also emphasises the newcomer's perceptions of these attitudes, and points to possible inconsistencies and discrepancies within these perceptions that may contribute to psychological distress. Findings from recent studies (Horenczyk, 1996; Horenczyk, in press) showed that Israeli immigrants from the former Soviet Union tend to perceive the host culture's expectations of them in regard to assimilation as much stronger than their own willingness to assimilate. Following self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989), it was suggested that these discrepancies between the immigrant's "actual/own" acculturation attitudes and his or her "ought/other" acculturation orientations (the individual's representation of the significant others' acculturation expectations) may lead to vulnerability to anxiety-related disturbances.

Such an approach to acculturation and adaptation, which puts heavy emphasis on the immigrants' representation and construction of their social world, can provide us with an additional perspective on the psychological
processes taking place during cultural transition. In most models dealing with migration, and in the majority of the studies reviewed by Berry, adaptation and acculturation are seen as fixed dimensions along which immigrants move during the process of cultural transition. Different groups of immigrants, or immigrants at different phases in their migration process, are located on the acculturation continuum (or in a two-dimensional space, in more complex models) and also along the continuum (or continua) of adaptation or adjustment. These models and investigations, however, generally fail to take into account the individual and social constructions of the cultural groups, and may thus offer a less complete and sometimes one-sided understanding of the acculturation process.

For many immigrant groups and individuals, the process of cultural transition involves a reconstruction of the cultural and social images of their minority groups and of the larger majority society. According to Birman (1994), for example, immigration to the United States has involved a profound redefinition of the cultural, ethnic, religious, and national identity of Soviet Jews. In her analysis of identity reformulation among Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, Shabtay (in press) identified three general processes involved in the acculturation of this group: re-evaluation of basic group identity, re-evaluation of the value of major life events, and redefinition of cultural identification, within both the Ethiopian and Israeli cultures. Ferdman and Horenczyk (in press) suggested that acculturation may bring about major changes in the immigrants' constructions of both the majority and their own minority cultures. Although behavioural and attitudinal changes in the direction of the adoption of norms, values, and behaviours that are generally associated to the majority culture are typically interpreted by acculturation researchers as evidence for the weakening of prior cultural allegiances, it may be the case that the culture of origin is reinterpreted or reconstructed in such a way that the new norms and behaviours become part of this construction, and the intensity and extent of allegiance remain relatively unchanged.

Acculturation may also bring about changes in the representation of health and illness, and may pose problems with the conceptualisation and assessment of mental health and adjustment among immigrants. In their discussion of acculturation and mental health among Hispanics, Rogler, Cortes, and Malgady (1991) held to the view that culture plays a fundamental, constitutive role in the expression of psychological states, and suggested that the social construction of internal experiences shaping psychological distress might change with increasing acculturation. They suggest that increases in acculturation are likely to project Hispanics into a more differentiated set of socio-cultural experiences that, along with increasing involvement in modern medical culture, progressively fragment a
more communally based traditional unitary self-concept of the body (Rogler et al., 1991).

John Berry has shown us in his article how much we have learned about acculturation and adaptation during the last decades. By looking at the complexity and multifacetedness of the host attitudes towards immigration, I suggested that a more differentiated approach may provide us with valuable insights into immigrants' adjustment problems. In addition, taking into account changes in the newcomers' construction of their social and cultural worlds may challenge our methods and findings about acculturation and adaptation, but can also add a new perspective to the examination of the psychological processes involved in cultural transition.

REFERENCES


