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Acculturation Strategies and Their Impact on Psychological Health

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Abstract

The dramatic rise in migration during this decade has sparked many questions regarding migrant's choices and how these choices determined or altered their lives. This study explores the impact of various acculturation strategies—assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization—on the mental well-being of migrants. Our research strategy involves employing a literature review to synthesize quantitative data from psychological assessments and qualitative insights from migrant interviews. Findings indicate that marginalization, characterized by a lack of engagement with both the host and origin cultures, correlates with the poorest mental health outcomes, including heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Conversely, integration, where migrants maintain their cultural heritage while also participating in the host culture, is associated with the most favorable psychological health, reflecting lower stress levels and higher life satisfaction. While some migrants report a sense of security and identity preservation, others experience isolation and limited social support, leading to mixed mental health outcomes. Ultimately, this research sheds light on how migrants' approach to cultural ties can be pivotal in their lives by directly impacting their psychological health. We aim for this paper to be a didactic source of information for policy makers, migrants and even citizens to use in order to create societies that promote collectivity and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Acculturation, psychological health, mental health, migration



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Introduction

Migration has always been and will continue to be a regular process in society. The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence states that it will especially increase in the next decade due to the obstinacy and intensification of “economic pressures, changing age structures, population growth, rapid urbanization and environmental stress” (DNI, 2021). Essentially, the current political and economical conditions are inducing a rise in international or even interregional migration. Consequently, individuals today are finding themselves exposed to a wider range of cultures, languages, traditions and even societal norms. Although this opens the door for the creation of diverse communities, it does not shut the door to acculturative stress/issues. Researchers today have come to a consensus on the acculturation process, relying heavily on data observed from Berry’s Model of Acculturation. Through his research, Berry proposed two core questions: “Does the individual value and want to maintain their native culture? And does the individual value and want to maintain the host culture?” (Worthy et al., 2020). These two simple questions led to the emergence of four distinct acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. For years now researchers have conducted countless studies on the benefits and consequences of each one, and in this research we plan to go into depth on how migrants’ choices on acculturation strategies influence their psychological well-being.

Integration

Often interchangeable with biculturalism, the first type of acculturation strategy is observed when an individual adopts or values the norms of both their culture of origin and the present host culture. However, this does not simply mean that an individual is uniformly and constantly using both of the cultures throughout their lives. Hong et al. (2000) explains this as he writes “ bicultural individuals move between their two cultural orientations by engaging in cultural frame switching (i.e. adapting and performing behaviors in response to the cultural context)”. In other words, bicultural individuals understand the benefit of certain cultures in certain environments, ultimately allowing them to better transition into the current society while also staying in touch with their ethnic community. For example, an Indian-American bicultural individual may uphold Anglo-American culture behaviorally and semantically in public spaces, such as school, yet still be very incorporated in their Indian moral/ethical principles, traditions and identity. For this reason, many researchers agree on this strategy having the most positive impact on migrants’ psychological health.

For example, a group of psychologists and researchers took a random sample of 268 ethnic minority college students from a large midwestern U.S. public university and performed The Bicultural Self-Efficacy Scale - Initial (BSES-I) to understand whether the individuals’ biculturalism was correlated with positive mental health. In their research, they “ found that the belief in one’s ability to function in two cultures may lead to better life satisfaction and lower levels of anxiety and depression symptoms among bicultural individuals.” (Okazaki et al., 2009). In essence, individuals who find themselves a part of both their ethnic culture and the host culture are more likely to report higher levels of joy and contentment about their lives. Clearly, due to the sense of comfort and belonging they receive from the society they live in and the open arms that greet them at home, these individuals are able to feel higher



levels of self-esteem and overall happiness. Additionally, Okazaki et al. (2009) noticed another intriguing element of their study as they write “In general, the results provide support to this prediction and to Bandura’s (1997) theory”. Clearly, they realized that their findings were in accord with Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy which states that a person’s firmness in his abilities can dictate his drives and decisions. This means that a person with a higher sense of self-efficacy is seen to have a more optimistic outlook on life with fewer incidences of stress-related dilemmas. Essentially, they underscore that the level of biculturalism on self-efficacy is directly correlated with individual mental well-being. So in the case of integration, which has a strong sense of value for both host and ethnic cultures, individuals would be expected to experience higher levels of self-efficacy, consequently leading to more positive mental health symptoms.

To further reinforce the idea that the integration acculturation strategy is linked with higher levels of psychological health, researchers Nguyen & Martinez (2009) emphasized how “involvement with two cultures (versus being separated, assimilated, or marginalized) leads to social and cognitive flexibility and wider behavioral repertoires and competencies that buffer the bicultural individual against the psychological maladjustment (e.g. anxiety, loneliness) or sociocultural maladjustment”. Clearly, they state that this strategy’s unique nature of valuing and adapting to two different cultures- in contrast with separation, assimilation and marginalization dealing with one or less- opens individuals’ minds to more diverse viewpoints, consequently fostering characteristics and feelings that diminish the adversity of the acculturation process. Essentially, migrants who use the integration strategy tend to avoid or have less intercultural and intracultural conflicts, leading to a majority of them having better mental health than migrants who use strategies like marginalization. To add, they also shed light onto how “biculturalism is found to be associated with better psychological adaptation, greater productivity and achievement” (Nguyen & Martinez, 2009). In essence, these individuals’ are seen to have higher levels of emotional/social intelligence by adjusting to their surroundings, higher levels of performance and higher levels of success. Not only are they experiencing a growth in their confidence in their personal and emotional lives, but also their careers. Therefore, these individuals generally are much more cheerful when compared to those who adopt the other strategies.

However, the separation strategy still does not shut the door to mental health problems. Even though many may see this concept as fulfilling for individuals, as it leads to open-mindedness, rich diversity and a higher sense of belonging, they may overlook the fact that it can cause internal conflicts on aspects like identity and social ethics. Nguyen & Martinez (2009) highlight this as they write “biculturalism can be associated with feelings of pride, uniqueness, and a rich sense of community and history, while also bringing to mind identity confusion, dual expectations, and value clashes”. In other words, despite the many benefits towards migrant mental well-being, separation may make migrants susceptible to internal conflicts, such as not figuring out where one may fit more. Their acceptance of two different cultures may make them feel as if they are not pure enough to fit into either cultural sphere, or an action might be frowned upon by their culture of origin but taken as normal by the host culture, leading to a clash on what to do. Another situation in which separation or biculturalism can be damaging is when their act of conforming to a host culture may result in backlash from their ethnic community, or vice versa. This is exemplified in The Oxford



Handbook of Acculturation and Health as Schwartz (2017) writes “a study of African American college students finds that family pressure to not acculturate as well as perceptions of ‘acting white’ were key factors for cultural stress for this population”. Clearly, bicultural college students were observed to become anxious over not knowing how much to involve themselves over each culture. If they completely dropped their own cultures they would not be accepted by their families, but if they dropped the host culture they would lose out on the interactions they had at college. Essentially, sometimes the separation strategy can lose its merit of being the most beneficial for mental health by resulting in migrants facing problems on their dual-natured personas.

Assimilation

The second type of acculturation strategies, assimilation is a strategy in which individuals adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture, often relinquishing their original culture. This approach involves complete immersion into the new culture, usually at the expense of losing the individuals cultural heritage. Cultural Assimilation has complex and multifaceted effects on a migrants psychological well being, with it leading to significant challenges for the immigrants.

One of the primary psychological consequences of assimilation is identity conflict. When an individual adopts the dominant culture it may experience a sense of disconnection from their original cultural identity. Through this disconnection can internal conflicts arise within the person as they deal with new cultural norms while losing touch with more and more of their original culture. According to Ward et al. (2001), this identity conflict can lead to significant stress and emotional turmoil, as individuals struggle to reconcile their past with their present. This conflict is often worsened by societal pressure to conform to the dominant culture, leading to a feeling of being torn between two worlds (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Furthermore, assimilation can weaken social support networks. Social support is crucial for psychological well-being, providing individuals with a sense of belonging and emotional support during difficult times. However, by relinquishing their original culture, individuals may lose touch with their cultural community, leading to weakened social ties. Ryan et al. (2008) highlight that this loss of social support can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, as individuals no longer feel connected to their cultural roots. The absence of a supportive community can exacerbate feelings of alienation, making it challenging for individuals to find comfort and understanding in their new environment (Berry, 2005).

Additionally, the pressure to conform to the dominant culture can result in acculturation stress. Acculturation stress refers to the psychological impact of adapting to a new culture, which can manifest as anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Berry et al. (1989) note that the demand to adopt new cultural norms and values can be overwhelming, leading to significant stress. This stress is often compounded by experiences of discrimination and prejudice, as individuals from minority cultures may face societal barriers to full acceptance within the dominant culture (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Such experiences can further exacerbate feelings of marginalization and mental distress (Gee et al., 2006).

Moreover, the loss of cultural heritage can lead to a diminished sense of self. Cultural heritage provides individuals with a sense of identity and continuity, grounding them in a shared history and set of traditions. Assimilation, by encouraging the adoption of the dominant culture at the expense of one's original culture, can erode this sense of continuity. Schwartz et al. (2010) emphasize that this erosion can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth and identity, as individuals may feel disconnected from their cultural heritage and uncertain about their place in the world. This loss of identity can contribute to long-term psychological distress and a sense of purposelessness (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013).

While assimilation may offer certain social advantages, such as easier integration into the dominant culture and potentially better economic opportunities, these benefits often come at a high psychological cost. The identity conflicts, loss of social support, acculturation stress, and diminished sense of self associated with assimilation highlight the complex and often challenging nature of this acculturation strategy (Sam & Berry, 2010).

Separation

Separation as an acculturation strategy involves individuals maintaining their original cultural identity and avoiding interaction with the dominant culture. This approach can lead to both positive and negative outcomes concerning financial well-being and psychological health. On the positive side, individuals who adopt the separation strategy may find comfort and support within their own cultural communities, which can foster a strong sense of identity and belonging. The Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute states that among latina immigrants, “it encompasses acquiring a new language, adapting to cultural and social dynamics, and adjusting to new food consumption patterns” (Berry, 2005). This community support can mitigate some of the psychological stresses associated with acculturation and provide a network for financial assistance and opportunities within the ethnic enclave.

However, the separation strategy also has significant drawbacks. By avoiding interaction with the dominant culture, individuals may limit their access to broader economic opportunities and resources. This can result in lower income levels, reduced job prospects, and limited upward mobility. Evidence from The National Institutes of Health shows that “perceived discrimination from the host society, differences with natives, problems of obtaining legal status, and other kinds of acculturation stress lead to lower levels of psychological well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction” (Ren, 2021). Furthermore, the lack of integration with the dominant culture can lead to social isolation and discrimination, exacerbating psychological distress. Research from Tulane University, a school of public health, suggests that “Language barriers, cultural and economic challenges, and limited social ties can contribute to social isolation for immigrants” (Tulane University, 2020). Individuals may experience feelings of exclusion and alienation, which can negatively impact their mental health and overall quality of life.

Marginalization

Lastly, another form of social exclusion, marginalization refers to the complete rejection of both an individual’s culture of origin and the present host culture. However, marginalization



is also seen when the migrant feels rejected from both their host and own ethnic cultures. For example, a research done by Cobb et al. (2017) found that some Mexican migrants in the U.S. were outcasted by their own ethnic groups due their illegal passage into the country. This interracial discrimination was discovered to correlate with an increased likelihood for the individual to succumb to marginalization as their dominant acculturation strategy. On the other hand, migrants can also reject their own cultures after witnessing discrimination or prejudice against their people in an attempt to protect themselves while still not completely integrating into the larger society. Regardless of the factors that result in migrants turning to this strategy, many researchers concur on its high correlation with negative experiences/symptoms like depression, loneliness and overall poor mental health, consequently labeling it as the most detrimental out of the four.

For instance, PhD candidate Anna Gvetadze and Associate professor Ekterine Pirtshkalava conducted a quantitative research on the choice of acculturation strategies of Azeri and Armenian migrants living in Georgia in an attempt to propose solutions for their mental well-being. In their study of 452 migrants they found that although marginalization was the most uncommon strategy (tied with assimilation), it had “a positive correlation with loneliness ($r=0.621$; $p=0.000$) and a negative correlation with optimism ($r=-0.433$; $p=0.000$) and self-esteem ($r=-0.408$; $p=0.000$)”. (Gvetadze & Pirtshkalava, 2024). Clearly, individuals who adopted marginalization as their dominant acculturative strategy were seen to feel more alienated and less sanguine and confident in their lives than their peers. Essentially, their lack of a strong sense of cultural identity combined with pressures stemming from being a foreigner in Georgia resulted in these individuals finding it more difficult to engage in social environments, therefore missing out on a crucial aspect of human life that brings comfort, bliss and belonging to individuals. Furthermore, their research resulted in an interesting finding on another aspect of psychological health: the locus of control. According to the developer of the concept, this phrase simply refers to an individual's beliefs about the extent of control that they have over things that happen to them (Rotter, 1966). Gvetadze and Pirtshkalava found that “marginalization escalated with external locus indices” (2024). In other words, as individuals were seen to believe that outside events- such as luck or fate- played a larger role in controlling their lives, they found themselves relying more on marginalization strategies and vice versa. Essentially, this acculturation strategy not only increases depressive-symptoms, but it also may alter an individual’s cognitive structures in ways that are problematic both emotionally and behaviorally.

To champion these findings, Choy et al. assessed 61,885 migrants from countries like Russia, Iran and Syria that were primarily pushed by war or economical reasons to move into European or North American countries. They found that “marginalization was associated with worse depression symptoms, compared to integration, assimilation and separation” (Choy et al., 2021). In essence, marginalization leads to overall poorer psychological health among migrants, as a result leading to more acculturative stress which directly influences the lives of these migrants. To further emphasize the idea that this strategy is disruptive towards psychological health Choy et al. writes “marginalization more than triples the likelihood of anxiety-related symptoms compared to integration” (2021). Clearly, when compared to the most favorable acculturation strategy, marginalization more perniciously exposes migrants to health-provoking symptoms like stress, loss of confidence, lack of concentration and constant



feelings of being on edge. Essentially, the concept of not fitting the mold of both your own culture and the host culture generally results in individuals becoming much more dejected and uneasy. As their mental health slowly eats away at their sense of belonging and identity, individuals find it much harder to obtain cheerful and meaningful lives.

To further highlight the detrimental nature of marginalization psychological professors from Germany, P. Schmitz & F. Schmitz (2022), conducted a meta-analysis on different acculturation strategies and broader dimensions of personality, cognitive styles, emotional abilities and psychological outcome variables. They state that “Marginalization revealed an opposite pattern in many cases, with higher levels of neuroticism, lower extraversion, lower conscientiousness, higher psychoticism, higher impulsivity, and higher aggression-hostility” (P Schmitz & F. Schmitz, 2022). In essence, marginalization was an outlier when it came to the four acculturation strategies, generally resulting in increased tendencies for anxiety, gloom, self-doubt, introversion, laziness, on edge behavior and other negative feelings. This suggests that individuals who use this strategy often struggle with emotional instability and social withdrawal, which highlights the severity of its impact on psychological health. It also further agrees with the previous studies showing how marginalization is correlated with higher levels of stress and lower levels of confidence. To add, they also noticed a trend in cognitive styles, more specifically dogmatism, among individuals who adopt marginalization for acculturation purposes as they wrote “marginalization has been found to be related with higher scores [for dogmatism]” (P Schmitz & F. Schmitz, 2022). Essentially, these individuals were found to be more opinionated in their beliefs, leading to less flexibility or open-mindedness when conversing with others. This tendency to stick to their opinions and not easy accept or value others’ may indicate the higher levels of loneliness experienced by migrants who adopt marginalization, as it shows their incapability to be empathetic or understanding of others’ viewpoints/perspectives while also underscoring their inability to change based on the circumstances. Importantly, this signifies why such individuals are aloof from both their ethnic cultures and the host cultures, as they are more likely to be unwilling to alter their ideologies for the sake of cohesion or agreement. On top of this, these researchers also found that “marginalization was found to be negatively related with emotional intelligence” (P Schmitz & F. Schmitz, 2022). Clearly, migrants that adopt marginalization were unable to function properly in social gatherings, implying that they lack the ability to connect meaningfully with themselves and the people around them. As a result of their disconnection with their own feelings and inability to understand others’, these individuals are more likely to find themselves suffering from loneliness, anxiety and poor mental health.

Conclusion

The various acculturation strategies adopted by immigrants play a pivotal role in shaping their psychological health. While assimilation and integration can offer pathways to social harmony, marginalization and separation present significant challenges. Separation, in particular, while preserving cultural identity and providing community support, often can lead to social isolation. The acculturation strategies adopted by migrants have a profound impact on their psychological health and overall well-being. This research underscores the complexities and diverse outcomes associated with different approaches to acculturation—



assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Among these, integration consistently emerges as the most beneficial strategy for migrants' mental health, as it promotes a balance between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing the host culture. This dual cultural engagement often results in better psychological adaptation, increased self-esteem, and overall life satisfaction, thanks to the social and cognitive flexibility it fosters. Understanding these dynamics is essential for policymakers and social workers aiming to support immigrant populations. By fostering inclusive environments that respect cultural diversity while promoting economic integration, societies can enhance the overall well-being of their immigrant members.



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