A dynamic approach to acculturation revisited

Karen van der Zee a, Jan Pieter van Oudenhoven b

a Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands
b University of Groningen, The Netherlands


In our paper published in this year’s spring edition of IJIR we advocate a dynamic approach to acculturation (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022). We argue that the complexity of modern multicultural societies asks for such an approach. Our paper builds upon earlier publications by Jan Pieter van Oudenhoven, together with Colleen Ward and Veronica Benet-Martínez, making the same claim (van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013; van Oudenhoven & Benet-Martínez, 2015). We received a response by John Berry to our paper that we would like to react to.

Berry’s response.

“…There are two main problems with the way in which you characterise my acculturation strategies framework. Your claim is that the conceptualisation in the framework is no longer able to deal with the complexity of acculturation in contemporary very culturally diverse societies. However, my formulation has dealt with these concerns from the beginning.

1. The first problem is that in the statement that:

“Berry’s acculturation model (1980) describes the orientation of immigrants towards the new society on two dimensions relating to the extent to which individuals (1) desire to preserve their ethnic culture and (2) wish to interact with the members of the majority group (Berry, 1980).”

There is a mis-characterisation in your presentation of the second issue. You present the second issue in the framework as focused on just one other group: the ‘majority’. However, in my writings, the second issue is phrased as “Positive relations with the dominant society” (1980), and as “a relative preference for having contact with, and participating in, the larger society along with other ethnocultural groups” (Berry, 2017a). The reference here is plural, not singular: “dominant society” and ‘larger society’ can mean any number of constituent groups, not just the ‘majority’. Hence, the cultural complexity of the evolving diverse society was already included in the original formulation.

2. The second main problem is that you do not seem to recognise that the 1980 framework incorporated the role of the dominant society in the way in which acculturation takes place. In the original formulation (1980) and in the most recent presentation (2017a), a third dimension is presented. This is the relative power of the groups to decide how to acculturate. This is conceived of in the concept of acculturation expectations and the multicultural ideology that are present in the larger society. The interactive nature of the acculturation process has been present over the history of the framework, and continues in my interest in the mutual nature of the process (Berry, 2017b).”

“I realise that many researchers have presented these mis-characterisations as being mine. However, if others want to create their own versions of an acculturation framework (i.e., adopt culture, rather than contact; majority rather than other groups in the larger society), they bear the responsibility for the continuing simplistic way of viewing the acculturation process.”

We are very happy to see that Berry agrees with us that acculturation models should be able to capture the complexity of nowadays’

E-mail address: k.i.van.oudenhoven-vander.zee@vu.nl (K. van der Zee).

1 Copied from personal email correspondence that we cite here with John Berry’s permission.

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accommodation issues and hence be dynamic. The core message in Berry’s response to our paper is that his framework has been able to accommodate a more dynamic approach of acculturation from the beginning. His criticism is that in the way we present his framework, we overlook this.

We asked ourselves how such a misconception could have come about. First, reexamining the literature, we see that acculturation strategies have been approached in a monolithic way by many scholars, also by senior authors. John Berry acknowledges this in his response, referring to the use of terms like adoption of culture, rather than engaging in contact with the host society and referring to the majority rather than other groups in the larger society. It may be noted that Berry as well as most other authors use the notion of ‘acculturation strategy’, a term which assumes consistency in acculturation behaviors across situations. This consistency becomes harder to understand when it relates to different groups in society or even single encounters with representatives of other cultural groups. For a long time following the first publications of Berry’s theory, the monolithic approach fitted the reality of immigration rather well. Many immigrant groups entered a host society where they were confronted with a clear dominant group. Their ‘simple’ task was to decide on cultural maintenance as well on their relationship to the dominant group in the host society. Also policies in the host societies and public opinion were built on the assumption of a dominant cultural group or a dominant cultural identity.

Another reason why older theorizing can be seen as monolithic is that, over time, scholars came with suggestions to move away from its monopolistic nature, by adding elements to approaches of acculturation.

A first example is the work of Bourhis, Moïse, Perrault and Senecal (1997) who emphasized the idea of acculturation as an interactive process, dependent upon attitudes of both immigrants and the host society. Their contribution made explicit predictions about the consequences of mutual combinations of acculturation preferences among immigrants and host society. Also in Berry’s own work the explicit attention for the interactive component of acculturation increased in importance over time. We can refer here to the widely used textbook on cross-cultural psychology by Berry and coauthors (Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 1992, 2002). In the first edition of the textbook (Berry et al., 1992, Fig 11–2, p. 278) the schematic overview of Berry’s acculturation model is restricted to four acculturation strategies of immigrants; in the second edition that came out in 2002, the overview was complemented with four strategies of the host society (Berry et al., 2002, Fig 13–2, p. 354).

A second example is an article, also published in IJIR, by Colleen Ward (2008) making a plea to think “outside the Berry boxes”. She argued that in previous work too much emphasis has been on acculturation as a static outcome and that its process elements have been largely overlooked. She raised the question already whether immigrant identities are situational and whether acculturation orientations change over time.

As a third example we can mention a study by Arends-Toth and Vijver (2003) incorporating explicitly contextual variations in acculturation orientations by studying and measuring acculturation separately in different life domains. More recently, scholars have expanded the need for broadening the concept of ethnic identity, pointing at the “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2019) that is characteristic of modern urban societies (e.g., van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013; Van de Vijver, Blommaert, Gkoumasi & Stogianni, 2015). These scholars argue that the traditional split between ethnic identity and mainstream identity as core identities of immigrants can no longer describe the multiple allegiances of many immigrants.

To conclude, we do not dispute that Berry’s model can accommodate a more dynamic approach of acculturation. At the same time, we submit that our text is in line with the interpretation that has dominated in the literature. The historical position is not surprising, since a monolithic conceptualization of acculturation for a long time provided a good fit with the reality that many immigrants faced longer describe the multiple allegiances of many immigrants.

We are happy to see that both Berry and we are trying to achieve the same thing: to accommodate the needs of modern societies in a refined approach to acculturation. Berry does so by elaborating on his original model (see for example Berry, 2017a), whereas we do so partly outside of his model, but evidently inspired by his work.

References


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Footnote:

1 Earlier work by Berry and colleagues (e.g., Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989) acknowledged the need to cover relevant life domains in items for the four acculturation attitudes (e.g. friendship and lifestyle). However, invariably items referring to different domains were combined into a single scale for each acculturation strategy, essentially precluding differential assessment of acculturation strategies across domains.
