

# ACCULTURATION: EARLY POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE CONCEPTIONS

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Acculturation refers to the psychological and cultural changes that are caused by continuous contact between people of different cultures. A culture is comprised of the norms, values, beliefs, information, and skills that people in a society share, and these are manifest in the visible behaviors, physical implements and social systems that the society expresses. Thus, different nations and ethnic groups have different languages, laws, religions, gender roles, manners, foods, clothes, architecture, etc. We are unaware of most aspects of our culture until we see them in contrast with other cultures. We think of ourselves as acting “naturally” and other peoples as acting differently because of *their* culture. A culture must have some adaptive utility to help a people survive in their environment and to transmit their way of life to future generations. However, all cultures have some maladaptive aspects due to cultural inertia in the face of changing natural and human environments.

### Cultural Learning

Cultural learning is based on imitation, especially during childhood enculturation, and later on overt instructions and institutionalized schooling. Cultural learning is a lifelong process since cultural norms define and regulate social roles and social situations, and these are being newly encountered as we progress from one age category to another or move from one setting or social position to another. Thus, we continually learn from our culture the information, skills, and attitudes, for example, to be students, teenagers, clerks, wedding guests, parents, tourists, home owners, professors, retirees, sports fans, cancer patients, grandparents, widows, etc. Furthermore, cultures are dynamic, and people must learn to adjust to changing norms, laws, and technologies. For example, old cultural norms such as burning trash in the back yard or phoning via telephone operators are giving way to new norms of recycling trash and phoning via text messaging. People are individually different in their abilities and their resources to learn their culture and different in their attitudes towards their culture’s norms and expectations. No

individuals encounter, comprehend, like, or practice the entirety of their culture.

Cultural learning may also happen when people encounter a foreign culture, depending on the individuals' abilities and on the norms of their group. Usually such acculturation entails the adoption of new cultural practices, for example, Americans learning to eat Japanese sushi, but it can also refer to the blending of cultures, for example, putting avocado into the sushi and calling it "California Roll". Thus, cultures change and evolve by acculturative processes, such that "California Roll" is now available in sushi bars in Japan. Many aspects of mainstream US society are the products of acculturation, for example, peanut butter, bagels, pizza, tacos, tobacco, coffee, wine, jazz, rock-n-roll, lacrosse, hockey, skiing, Boy Scouts, Thanksgiving turkey, Christmas trees, Easter eggs, and the world-wide-web. However, acculturation can also entail reactions against the new culture, for example, disliking foreign foods or feeling that foreign ways are dirty, immoral, or inferior. The range of acculturative reactions includes racism, inter-ethnic war and genocide.

### History of Acculturation

Acculturation is a universal human experience, as shown by archaeological evidence of prehistoric cultural diffusion. Plato was probably the first to write about acculturation:

"The intercourse of cities with one another is apt to create a confusion of manners; strangers are always suggesting novelties to strangers. When states are well governed by good laws, the mixture causes the greatest possible injury; but seeing that most cities are the reverse of well-ordered, the confusion which arises in them from the reception of strangers, and from the citizens themselves rushing off into other cities, when any one either young or old desires to travel anywhere abroad at whatever time, is of no consequence. On the other hand, the refusal of states to receive others, and for their own citizens never to go to other places, is

an utter impossibility, and to the rest of the world is likely to appear ruthless and uncivilized; it is a practise adopted by people who use harsh words, such as xenelasia or banishment of strangers, and who have harsh and morose ways" (Plato, *Laws XII*, 348BC/1892, pp. 338-339).

Plato observed that acculturative learning is greatest for the young and for lone individuals, and he therefore recommended that acculturation be minimized by permitting people to travel abroad only after age 40 and only in company with fellow citizens. Foreign visitors, he argued, should be kept outside the city walls, restricted to the port district, in order to minimize acculturative contamination of the society.

The United States has been a focus of acculturation theory because it is an expansive continental nation first populated by a variety of American Indian societies, who were invaded by settlers from several European societies, who kidnapped slave laborers from several African societies, and eventually accepted immigrants from many parts of the world. DeTocqueville described acculturation as the assimilation of these cultures to one another:

"If this tendency to assimilation brings foreign nations closer to each other, it must a fortiori prevent the descendants of the same people from becoming aliens to each other. The time will therefore come when one hundred and fifty millions of men will be living in North America, equal in condition, the progeny of one race, owing their origin to the same cause, and preserving the same civilization, the same language, the same religion, the same habits, the same manners, and imbued with the same opinions, propagated under the same forms. The rest is uncertain, but this is certain; and it is a fact new to the world - a fact fraught with such portentous consequences as to baffle the efforts even of the imagination" (DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835/1945, vol. 1, p. 452).

### First Uses of “Acculturation”

This focus on acculturation in America has extended to include the other continental Anglo-Saxon settler societies of Canada and Australia, such that acculturation research has been narrowed to theories and studies of how relatively powerless immigrants and ethnic minorities, including aboriginal peoples, adjust to the dominant, majority culture, with little consideration now of how the majority learns from the minorities. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the word “acculturation” was first used by J. W. Powell in 1880 to describe changes in American Indian languages as a result of their contact with European settlers, and in 1883 he defined acculturation as the psychological changes that follow from cross-cultural imitation. In 1904, G. Stanley Hall theorized that acculturation and socialization were similar learning processes, noting that Harvard University was founded in 1636 to provide Christian Anglo-Saxon education for American Indians and for adolescent colonial settlers.

The first full psychological theory of acculturation was proposed by Thomas and Znaniecki in their 1918 account of *“The Polish Peasant in Europe and America.”* They argued that culture is comprised of the cognitive schemata and habits that are learned and useful in a stable, traditional society. Acculturation occurs when people enter the modern, urban, commercial world characterized by efficiency, individualism, and rapidly changing relationships and norms. Three types of acculturative personalities are defined by the two basic biological motivations of fear and curiosity. The Philistine personality is high in fear, low in curiosity, and clings to traditional schemata and habits, but at the cost of maladaptation in the modern society. The Bohemian personality is low in fear, high in curiosity, and thus easily changes to fit the flux of the modern world, but at the cost of personality disintegration and social dissociation. The creative personality is moderate in both fear and curiosity, and therefore maintains the schemata and habits of a stable personality while making controlled adjustments in order to maximize

social opportunities.

### Acculturative Stress

During the course of the 20th century, more than 100 acculturation theories like this have been developed, arguing that minorities can assert their attachment to their traditional culture, or can abandon it to join the dominant culture, or can develop some form of biculturalism. A diminished, maladaptive biculturalism has been called marginality or deculturation, and successful, adaptive biculturalism has been called double loyalty, democratic acculturation, interactionism or integration. The four most prominent social psychologists advocating this kind of paradigm have been Kurt Lewin and Emory Bogardus in the USA, Ronald Taft in Australia, and most recently John Berry in Canada.

Plato, Thomas and Znaniecki, and many others have argued that acculturation can cause social and psychological distress. If acculturation entails conflicting cultural norms, for example, gender equality and patriarchy, or entails contradictory demands, for example, minorities assimilating to a racist society that does not accept them, that can cause, according to Bartlett (1923/1970, pp. 148-152), "compromise formations," "pathological developments of social life," "violent social reversions," or, according to Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936, p. 152) "psychic conflict." The expression "acculturative stress" was in use for several decades before Born (1970) theorized that there are four adaptive modes for coping with acculturative stress: innovation, retreatism, reconciliation, and withdrawal, which are now called assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization, respectively (Berry, 1997). The predominant and continuing focus of psychological research on acculturation has been to try to measure the relative successfulness of these four modes of acculturation in reducing acculturative stress.

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