

## Examining Acculturation: Can One Theory Really Explain all Experiences of Migration?

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### Abstract

*This article explores considerations for research relative to various theoretical approaches used to examine the subject of acculturation. The article also discusses the application of a prominent theory of acculturation to explain all Newcomer experiences of migration. John Berry's acculturation theory is summarized and then discoursed through a critical lens. In addition, my story of migration and lived experience is weaved throughout the article to highlight examples of my own process of acculturation and its impact on aspects of my life. To conclude, potential limitations regarding the use of "a" theory to explain experiences of migration are conferred as well as the impression of acculturation on the lives of Newcomers.*

### 1. Introduction

"I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing" [20].

I didn't know at the time that I was acculturating to my new home and community. I didn't even understand what that meant; I'm not sure I do even now. I just remember how I felt, always different, even though I had a citizenship card with my name and a picture of a little girl with pigtails and two missing front teeth that said I was supposed to be the same, just like all other Canadians. I knew I didn't feel completely Lebanese anymore either. My social circle and interests were changing. I was gradually losing my language, my accent, my connection to my Lebanese community in both Lebanon and Halifax. But perhaps, most noticeably, I started to feel shame. I was

ashamed of being different, looking different, of my family, of my culture. I didn't want to feel this way but I didn't know how not to. So I just let it happen, and overtime it just felt natural to feel shame all of the time. This, while doing everything I could to keep myself and my differences from being noticed. As an adult I found myself looking at that picture of myself as a little girl and apologizing to her, for what I wasn't sure. I felt like I didn't give her the life she deserved, the life she could have had. It wasn't until I started my PhD work that I began to realize that that little girl didn't get the life she deserved; that much was true. However, I also started to recognize that it wasn't all my doing or certainly my choice.

I remember the sense of relief I felt after reading Edward Said's book *Orientalism* [33] for the first time, on the recommendation of my PhD supervisor. I finally understood what it meant to be "othered," what it felt like to have my story told by the dominant culture to everyone around me, including me. The accuracy of the narrative was not important but rather that "they" held the power and privilege of telling my story and having "their" version authenticated as truth. That was the real purpose, the intentionality, consciously or not, behind the act, maintaining power and control of what "they" felt "they" were naturally entitled to. As a result, defining my identity became something I had seemingly little control over. I didn't know the feelings of marginalization I experienced throughout my life had a name. I thought it was just a way of being, of existing in the world. And so I felt myself attaching to theory as if it were a lifeline, an awakening to a world where I was given the gift of explanation and understanding, of language and meaning, of thinking critically.

## 2. Eclectic Theoretical Considerations for Migration Research

As it turns out, theory and me, we were not a neat and tidy pair. No, we were more like an assorted puzzle made up of pieces that fit or seemed to fit, even when logic and jagged mismatched edges said they shouldn't. Many of Said's post-colonial positions are aligned with my own epistemology and have significant implications on my methodological choices in research. Perhaps what connects Said and me the most is our shared experience as Arabic migrants to the West, he to the United States and me to Canada. In his book, Said profoundly writes, "For objective reasons that I had no control over, I grew up as an Arab with a Western education. Ever since I can remember I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other" [29]. This speaks to the struggles faced by many migrant people, including myself, of feeling excluded from the culture to which they now belong but also feeling somewhat disconnected from the culture from which they came. The experience of detachment from culture is an important consideration for researchers working with the Newcomer population and for planning research methodologies. It is important to be aware of the delicate situation migrant people are in with respect to negotiating their identity in a new place and also the impact leaving their homeland may be having on their lives, their emotional state and their process of acculturation.

Although Said would call himself a humanist first with a post-colonial orientation, his ideas were strongly rooted in a critical perspective. The inception of critical theory originated from the Frankfurt School in Germany in the 1930's. The theory is largely connected to Marxism as well as capitalist intrusion and influence on social structures. One cannot carry out research on the acculturation of Newcomers in a Western culture without considering the impact of socio-cultural factors like socio-economics, power and privilege. With respect to a discourse on power, no theorist has been more influential than Michel Foucault: "But in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives [17]."

In the Canadian Atlantic region, culture is largely built on European heritage and seems less so on African, Eastern European, Asian, Arab or Indigenous origins. As a result, the culture is more vulnerable to infusion of imperialistic influence. This point stresses the importance of focusing on the narratives of

migrant people in a study of immigration and acculturation rather than on the word of dominant discourse, policies, documents, and so called 'experts', who may be predominantly of European and Western descent. Furthermore, recognizing the relationship of power between Newcomers and those from the dominant society, including potentially the researcher, is another imperative consideration for migration research and its design.

For a great deal of time, despite being strongly centered in critical theory, I struggled with aligning myself with either a post-colonial frame or an anti-colonial paradigm, not really comprehending their differences. It was when I came across the writings of George J. Sefa Dei and his complex work on anti-colonialism that I was finally able to distinguish between the two. An anti-colonial position provides a space to take up the notion that we are not in a post-colonial period but rather one where colonial and imperialistic practices are still present but perhaps more covert. Moreover, an objection to all forms of colonization, regardless of time, place or colonizer are possible in an anti-colonial perspective, and are not solely and historically concentrated on imperial Europe. "There is nothing post about colonialism; there has never been, and there will never be, as long as our social relations are marked by relations of power and domination structured along the lines of race and other forms of difference (gender, sexuality, religion, language, and class)" [16]. Therefore, in relation to migration research, it is important to consider not only the power dynamics at play in the societal structures which Newcomers will now be considering and accessing, such as Education and Health as examples, but also the relationships with the people they will engage with within these systems. The researcher must also be aware of considering power when reviewing the knowledge and information obtained from participants in a study, how that information is gathered and how it is analyzed. Most importantly, a critical and anti-colonial consideration of power can largely be used as a lens by which to design the research process, analyse the data from the study, draw conclusions and make recommendations, always keeping Newcomers at the centre of this important work.

"The aim of anti-colonial discourse is to provide a common zone of resistance and struggle, within which variously diverse minoritized, marginalized, and oppressed groups are enabled to "come to voice." And subsequently to challenge and subvert the hegemonic systems of power and domination" [16]. Again, Dei's notion of allowing oppressed groups to "come to voice" is well aligned with my own positionality on privileging the voices of migrant people, whose ideas and beliefs may not be those shared by the dominant

society. Hearing from marginalized Newcomers about what it is they need, how they feel, and what they are experiencing concerning their acculturation to this new place, will give them the opportunity to tell their own story. Inadvertently, it aids the broader society with improving systems and practices to meet the needs of an expanding and diverse population of Canadians.

My orientation in several like-minded but different theoretical frameworks left me wondering; is there a “one size fits all” theory that clarifies acculturation, a theory that could help illuminate my own and others’ lived encounters of migration? As I continued researching in the area of intercultural studies and migration, I found that John Berry’s acculturation model kept coming up time and time again. Might I have stumbled upon the theory I’ve been searching for, one that explains acculturation processes while respecting a critical perspective?

### 3. Acculturation Defined

In its simplest definition, acculturation means “to assimilate to a different culture, typically the dominant one.” [23]. Acculturation is the term more commonly used in the psychological arena [1, 2, 4 8, 18], while in the sociological and anthropological discourse, enculturation is more often referenced [22, 37, 39]. “Enculturation is the process by which people learn the requirements of their surrounding culture and acquire values and behaviours appropriate or necessary in that culture” [19]. One could infer from this explanation of enculturation that since all humans are born into a culture and society of some sort, that migrant people are first encultured in their own ethnic society, learning the roles, values and norms of that culture. Then, following migration, Newcomers are left to either abandon their ethnic culture or completely adopt the dominant culture, in which they now live. Or alternatively, migrant people must fiercely protect their ethnic culture or try to integrate and marry the two cultures somehow, while attempting to deal with other sociocultural factors, such as socio-economic situations, religious differences, and an inability to communicate seamlessly in the dominant language. Still, a process of enculturation such as the one described here, from one “singular” culture to another, is challenged in the literature. It soon became clear to me that the choice between acculturation and enculturation was simply a manifestation of a greater debate between acculturation and its contrarian, critical acculturation. To appreciate the latter, critical acculturation, one must first understand the pillars of acculturation theory itself.

### 4. Berry’s Acculturation Theory

John Berry’s acculturation theory is perhaps one of the most common and current theories used in cross cultural psychology to explain immigrant identity formation. Berry’s theory explains the acculturation process of Newcomers from their ethnic culture to their host culture following migration. The theory is rooted in a behavioural and cross-cultural psychology paradigm, similar to other identity theories in the literature [35, 36]. Berry first describes acculturation as, “...the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. At the group level it involves changes in social structures and institutions and in cultural practices. At the individual level, it involves changes in a person’s behavioral repertoire” [5]. Berry posits that attitudes toward acculturation and behaviour during intercultural encounters, of both migrant individuals and those from the dominant society, determine how smoothly the acculturation process occurs. Additionally, Berry states that at both individual and societal levels, commitment to maintenance of heritage culture and identity and desire for relationships sought among groups will also impact the acculturation process. Berry acknowledges that the dominant culture can put barriers in place for those trying to acculturate; however, he does not take up the impact of specific socio-cultural constraints, such as power, religion, race, and socio-economics on acculturation processes of those individuals. Rather, he identifies broader undefined conditions of segregation and exclusion by the host society of the people trying to acculturate. In contrast, when the dominant society embraces the acculturation of migrant people, Berry identifies this experience for the acculturating individuals and the wider society as multiculturalism and a melting pot. Berry states that when a society welcomes diversity, then the onus is on the person acculturating and the strength of his/her commitment to maintaining an ethnic identity to determine how well he/she acculturates. In such cases, the acculturating individual contributes to his/her separation and marginalization from the hosting society or his/her integration and assimilation into it. Berry discusses the acculturation process through the use of a flow chart with neatly outlined boxes, representing the clash of “Culture A” interacting with “Culture B.” The flow and seamlessness of the acculturation process in Berry’s model is dependent on acculturation strategies, changes in behaviour, and acculturation stress of the two cultures. Finally, Berry concludes that both the individual attempting to acculturate and the host society negotiate through the acculturation process, each giving things up, in order

to avoid conflict and live harmoniously together in one place; everyone is changed in the process.

## 5. Acculturation Theory through a Critical Lens

There are a few key arguments challenging Berry's acculturation theory. The claims are centered in a critical acculturation context, despite the fact that many of the authors are anchored in psychological research. The researchers' debate discourses the tensions and disparities between acculturation and critical acculturation in relation to migration experiences. Again, the use of language and its connection to particular epistemologies is taken up in several of the arguments. For example, as mentioned earlier, the term enculturation is preferred by several critical acculturation advocates because of its alignment with an anthropological perspective on socialization as opposed to a behavioural psychology orientation. Similarly, use of the term intercultural instead of cross cultural purposefully underscores the impact of social exchanges on individuals as opposed to blanket changes that occur across entire cultures.

The anthropological definition of acculturation is: "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" [27]. Despite being outdated, this definition of acculturation is still commonly used [13, 14, 28]. Although in the definition the reference to phenomena is derived from cultural anthropology, the epistemology and methodology regarding the study of acculturation remain strongly rooted in cross-cultural psychology. The framework of cross-cultural psychology is problematic for several reasons. First, the concept of acculturation here implies that the study is of cultural change and not the change of individuals within cultures. Secondly, "cross cultural" presumes changes occur only at a social group level and not at an individual level. Finally, there is little attention paid in the definition of acculturation to the possible phenomena that have such an impact on individuals and cultural change [13, 14, 28]. Moreover, the use of other terms in acculturation research, such as assimilation, adaptation and integration, are not clearly delineated, nor is there a distinction made between these terms and acculturation [10, 39] which causes great confusion about which term is appropriate to use and when.

In his critique of acculturation theory, Waldram [37] described the use of the word cross-cultural as challenging, as it strongly relates to the field of social psychology. Waldram goes on to explain that social

psychology examines universal social phenomena and tries to relate those occurrences to other cultures and countries by way of comparative research. These comparative studies aim to identify universal rules of social behaviour across nations and without boundaries. Yet again, there is no focus on individuals or individual social encounters within cultures here, nor is there any consideration of how everyone involved in a social encounter is impacted. Furthermore, in cross-cultural social psychology research, universal rules of behaviour are measured and represented empirically. There is a heavy use of methods that include surveys, tests and scales to characterize social encounters, with few focusing on the socio-cultural factors related to social experiences [13, 15]. Consequently, many in the anthropological field were left wondering if culture itself is even part of acculturation studies any longer. As a result, a critical acculturation approach to cultural research emerged causing academics to moving away from the term "cross-cultural" to the more inclusive term "intercultural" [37]. The word intercultural better highlights the distinct change(s) that can occur and impact all individuals involved in a social exchange or encounter. Again, by choosing to use the word intercultural, Waldram underlined the importance of altering language in a way that supports the notion that there is more than one culture per place and that people don't simply cross over from one culture to another after migrating.

Another of the key anthropological arguments against acculturation theory is that researchers, often psychologically positioned, engage in study and discourse about culture as if it is the same for all who experience it, a cookie cutter experience so to speak for individuals who are part of a common social group [37]. This modernist epistemology used to study culture differs greatly from current critical and postmodern perspectives, which see culture as an individual occurrence, one where culture is not defined but rather ambiguous for all those who experience it. Here, culture is interpreted differently by people based on their lived experiences in their unique social worlds [21]. Chirkov [13] argues that the use of hypotheses and deductive reasoning do not work in the study of culture, as there are no probable regularities in behaviour, but rather individual responses to social encounters. Additionally, the success of acculturation is not solely based on the strategies used by Newcomers attempting to adjust to a new society as suggested by acculturation theory, but rather equally involves the roles of those from the dominant society in the social experience [28, 39].

As a final point, while some critical acculturation scholars describe enculturation as cultural learning, [39, 28] others describe it as the process for learning to

be cultural in a given real world context” [37]. Waldrum’s explanation emphasizes that there is not one way of experiencing culture for all individuals engaged in an intercultural encounter, even for those people who come from the same social or “cultural” group. Regardless, both of the definitions above represent culture as a process rather than an entity. Furthermore, using this concept of enculturation rather than acculturation implies that not only is enculturation a process of cultural learning, but more importantly, the process is not universal, as suggested by Berry’s acculturation theory [10]. By understanding and studying acculturation as a process without definitive boundaries, researchers would be better equipped to use the data to promote and address personal growth, individual development and family relations [28, 33]. Such an approach would be far more beneficial to the migrant community and the agencies that support them, instead of mostly benefiting the researcher [14, 28]. Therefore, although the word enculturation may be preferred by some, the literature in cultural studies of migration is less concerned with the use of a word, like acculturation or enculturation, and more concerned with a critical acculturation position that challenges the more traditional research approaches in cross-cultural social psychology [37]. Examining intercultural encounters as a process of enculturation provides insight to researchers of individual cultural changes that occur for both Newcomers and those from the dominant society as opposed to only engaging in discourse about broad and unrefined societal changes in ethnic and host cultures.

To conclude, a number of recommendations are being made by critical acculturation researchers to enhance the study of acculturation following migration, and to aid in its shift from an examination of group processes to an inquiry about individual experiences. Chirkov [14] writes, “Acculturation is an open-ended, continuous process that includes processes, relapses, and turns which make it practically impossible to predict and control. This process should be described, interpreted, and understood by the researchers.” A critical methodology to acculturation is aided by the use of the word enculturation, meaning that individuals socialize to a variety of cultural components without having to either neglect their indigenous heritage or reject the society in which they now live [39]. Critical acculturation is a developing social process that is born out of encounters between participating individuals where many socio-cultural factors are at play, including history, politics, economics, and so on [10, 13, 15, 33, 39]. Epistemologically, acculturation can be studied in many forms of interpretive social science, including ethnography, phenomenology,

symbolic interactionism, participatory action research and narrative analysis [14, 15, 33]. The latter point being that it is important methodologically to take a multi-method approach to the study of cultural change following migration [10, 14, 39].

## 6. Berry’s Rebuttal

It would be unjust not to mention John Berry’s position on the challenges expressed regarding his model of acculturation noted in the previous section. In Berry’s response to the many criticisms of his work on acculturation, he has this to say, “Numerous assertions about my views are made in the various articles; simply saying and repeating them does not make them true. This remark is directed at the serious lack of evidence provided by many of the authors to substantiate their assertions” [6]. Yet again, we are engaged in the same argument that has existed between positivist and post-positivist, quantitative and qualitative, researchers for more than a century. Berry argues that as people we share a common humanity, and it is these commonalities that allow social scientists to conduct comparative research among various cultures, a cross cultural psychology approach. Berry goes on to say that research does not have to take an either/or position but can include both natural and cultural traditions. Still, Berry concedes that there are dual considerations of culture after migration, both from an individual and group perspective and ethnographic approaches to research can unearth one’s individual experiences with and in culture. However, Berry states the ways in which individuals process intercultural encounters are often grounded in human psychological universals. Finally, Berry opposes the claim that his research on acculturation lacks a study of culture. He claims that in his numerous studies on acculturation, he uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods, including an ethnographic methodology, as well as collaborating with anthropologic research partners.

## 7. Understanding Impacts of Acculturation

Newcomers to Canadian society, may at times feel caught between two hybrid [9] and potentially conflicting identities [24]. Disjointed and conflicting identities within a family unit can contribute to catastrophic consequences, as was the case with the honour killings of the Shafia sisters by their father, mother and brother in Kingston, ON (2009), the murder of 16 year old Aqsa Parvez of Mississauga, ON (2007), strangled to death by her brother and father, and the homicide of Dr. Ottilia Chareka by her

husband Patrick Chareka in Antigonish, NS (2011). There have been an estimated 13 honour killings in Canada over the last decade [12], an increase in gender violence against immigrant women [26], an increase in gang affiliations by immigrant youth [25], and a growing number of cases of psychosis among immigrant populations, resulting from migration related adversity and other social conditions [11, 31]. These violent consequences associated with migration demand an examination of the ways in which communities and services support Newcomer families, and a consideration of the sociocultural elements that both bind and separate us as Canadians.

My first experience as an educator was teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at a junior high school in an area of Halifax that had a very dense population of Newcomer families, primarily those who had immigrated to Canada under refugee status, and came from refugee camps throughout Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. I saw firsthand the struggles of those families, the trauma and culture shock they were experiencing, the systemic barriers they faced, not unlike my own family. They felt very much excluded by the society to which they now belonged and had a difficult time interlacing their own culture with that of the westernized dominant culture. I had female students who came from Afghanistan who had never held a pencil in their hands before and others of African descent who would not make eye contact with me as their teacher because I appeared to be “white” and they did not want to dishonour me in anyway. I was teaching when a Newcomer father of one of my students died by suicide from hanging himself from a tree on the school property. It took me a very long time to understand and accept his decision, which I initially interpreted as completely selfish. Overtime, however, I began to understand his choice. He was depressed because he could not support his family in their new country, a situation beyond his control and littered with systemic barriers that perhaps he wasn't even aware of. Nonetheless, he wanted to die close to his children, and that I began to accept and oddly appreciate.

According to Statistics Canada, the country's population is projected to grow from the current 33.7 million people to between 40.1 and 47.7 million people by 2036. Immigration levels account for the greatest percentage of the population increase in years to come [32]. Over the next number of decades Canada will continue to open its doors to Newcomers through various immigration initiatives. The nation, as a result, will have to address policy and systemic gaps in its response to migrant citizens. However, there is little migration research specific to the cultural uniqueness of provinces and very few qualitative studies in relation to the influence of sociocultural

factors on the identity negotiation and acculturation processes of migrant people. Future research in the study of acculturation will be beneficial to Newcomers during their own acculturation to Canada, but also to policy developers and practitioners as they work toward supporting Newcomers in a more respectful, reflexive and culturally responsive way.

## 8. Conclusion

Based on my lived experiences of acculturation, I concur with the many critical acculturation arguments challenging Berry's acculturation theory regarding its universal approach to culture. One needs to only ask Dr. Berry whom he believes has the privilege of defining the universal cultural norms he refers to, and to whose advantage and disadvantage do these norms exist? I believe there is no one way to be “culturalized,” whether referring to one's indigenous experiences or to cultures that exist in their new location following migration. In the end, I am more comfortable with a critical acculturation approach to the study of intercultural migration experiences and what it represents and challenges epistemologically. Without using actual or definitive stages of an acculturation process, one can imagine people's acculturation into a new society as a spectrum of experiences, ebbing and flowing through varied intercultural social encounters. Each of these diverse encounters, distinct in its own way, begs social scientists to consider the potentially endless number of socio-cultural factors at play, a task neither easy nor tidy for a critical researcher.

My own family is a perfect example of people's different experiences and responses to acculturation. My parents remain connected to their Lebanese heritage but my mother, who worked in the English speaking community, is much more comfortable with social interactions and the use of English language during such engagements. My father remains quite removed from the dominant English speaking culture and is dependent on his children to lead interactions he has within the broader “Canadian” society. My sisters and I went in all different directions. Two of my older sisters married into our Lebanese community and are much more attached to cultural practices and even our home back in Lebanon, which they regularly visit. My oldest sister, who in many ways worked so hard to challenge my parents to break down some of the social boundaries they put up after our family migrated, due to a lack of trust in the new culture, seems to be more disconnected from her indigenous culture. It makes sense that the culture you work so hard to push against may be one that you lose a connection with as you age. Nonetheless, that same sister recently returned to Lebanon, after refusing to visit for many years, and

seems to have a new appreciation for the culture and its strong sense of community. My brother, who is the youngest child, and is the only sibling to have been born in Canada after we migrated, has a difficult time understanding the impact of acculturation on the rest of us. He doesn't completely understand the hardships we faced, since he believes we grew up in Canada for the majority of our lives so our experiences aren't or shouldn't be very different from his own. Interestingly, my description of family above is based solely on observation, as we have never really talked about the influence migration has had on us. As far as I am concerned, I know my lived encounters and my reflexivity around the negotiation and development of my identity are exactly what have brought me to this place and at this time in my life.

## 8. References

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