

Acculturation in the Borderland

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Abstract

The border area between the United States and Mexico has seen an influx of Mexican immigrants and sojourners searching for a better life. Their involvement in “psychological acculturation” (Graves, 1967) can quickly become problematic since a lack of resources often forces rapid vocational decisions on the new arrival. The new entrants to the border area experience a profound lack of cultural fit between themselves and their new environment. This lack of copasetic cultural integration is called acculturative stress.

There has been considerable work done regarding how difficulties in acculturation can express themselves as a comparable lack of achievement among Hispanic children within Anglo school districts. In the vocational area, as well, acculturative stress has been shown to exacerbate migrants’ intentions to quit a job as well as increase the absenteeism that often precludes such a break. Acculturative stress also inflates the depressive symptomology of these same individuals prior to a rupture of the acculturative process altogether that, in this case, causes a return to the Mexican interior. Elements present in the proximate environment of the migrant have been sought as moderators and mediators of acculturative stress for the implicit purpose of lessening its effects (Bass, 2003).

It is the purpose of the present work to argue conceptually for a broader purpose in identifying sources of this stress, its moderators/mediators, and the outcomes of its impact on the migrant. As different individuals and groups of the new entrants have positive as well very negative, unwelcome agendas, an increase in the knowledge of factors affecting their movement and attempts to gather resources should only lead to beneficial actions long-term. Hopefully, understanding the issues faced along the journey may make the welcome more satisfying for many and the rejection of others more absolute.

Introduction

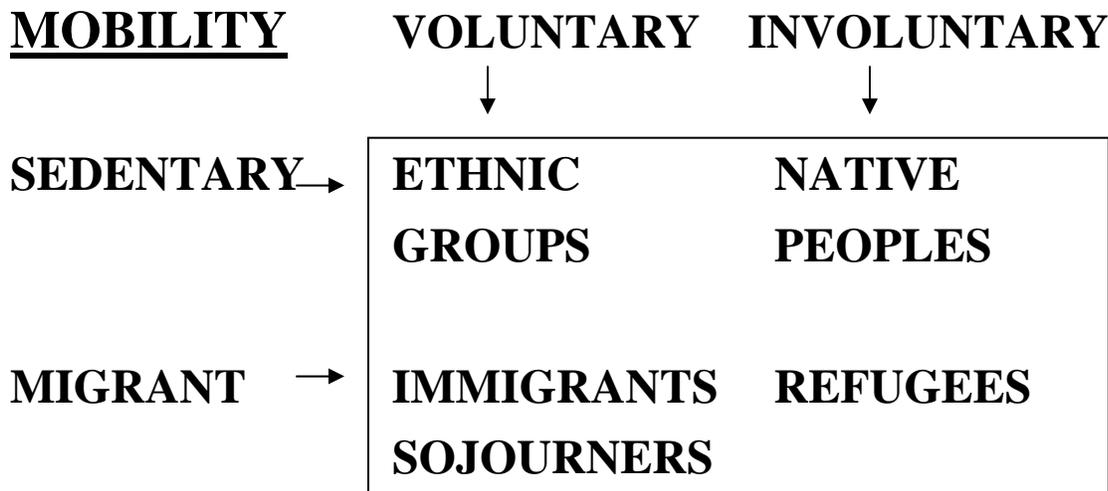
To appreciate the process of acculturation experienced by the recent Mexican migrant to the Anglo culture of the US, the focus of the process of acculturation must be at the individual level. Berry (1997) describes three approaches to acculturation delineated by the degree of difficulty that the migrant faces. The first phase is a “behavior shift” which results when there is only a small amount of felt stress. “Psychopathology” results when there is the greatest level of

difficulty experienced by the acculturating individual including a very high level of felt stress. The middle range of difficulty is that experienced by most acculturating individuals and is named “Acculturative Stress.” Acculturative stress is then the distress felt by those such as the Mexican migrant due to a lack of cultural fit between the heritage of Mexican nationals and that of the newer Anglo culture as well as an actual category of such distress.

An individual experiences migration as a traumatic series of events whose effects are not always expressed nor are always visible. Grinberg and Grinberg (1984) suggest that migration can be an individual or collective crisis precipitated by cumulative, tension traumas. acculturative stress (Torres-Matruilo, 1976) can leave the migrant particularly vulnerable on a personal level to variables which may negatively affect personal and vocational consequences.

Review of Relevant Literature

There are antecedents to acculturative stress which impact its severity. The figure below is Berry’s (1990) expression of two variables which either potentiate or suppress it-the mobility of subjects as well as whether or not their condition is voluntary. For both immigrants and

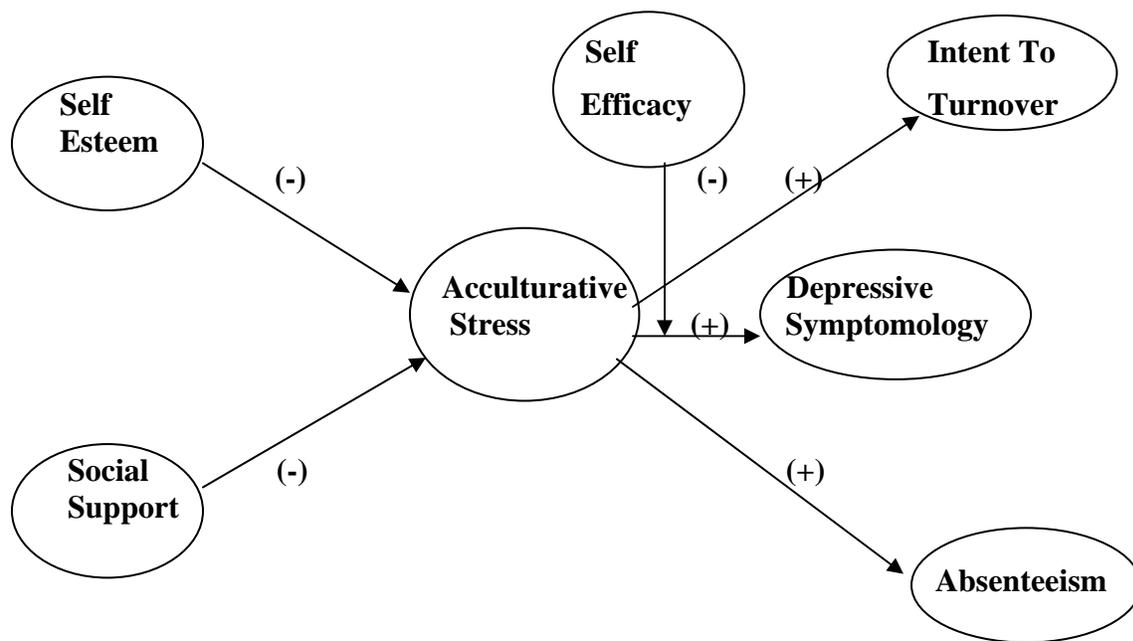


(Berry, 1990)

Acculturating Groups

Figure 1

sojourners, those whose migratory pattern is affected by an intent to return to the culture of origin, there is an increase in the severity of their distress over other, more sedentary groups. The presence of personal volition in their decision to enter another culture negatively impacts the severity of acculturative stress. Salgado de Snyder (1987) has found that married Mexican women in this group have elevated levels of distress since they are often included in such groups as a result of decisions made exclusive of their own volition.



A PARTIAL MODEL OF RELATIONSHIPS

Figure 2

An exogenous variable to our proposed relationship (shown in Figure 2), which is an antecedent to acculturative stress, is self esteem (Bass, 2003). While self esteem has been studied as an outcome variable by some researchers (Flaskerud, 1996; Gil, 1994), self esteem is considered by many more to be an important internal resource which affects acculturative stress levels. Most studies find a strong negative relationship between the two, that is, high self esteem predicts lower levels of acculturative stress. Chan (1977) has found a strong association between stress and resultant strain with low self esteem, high anxiety and self perceptions of helplessness and hopelessness. This relationship was found to be true in a study of Japanese and Japanese-American students (Padilla, 1985) as well as in a study of students who immigrated after about 14 years of age (Padilla, 1986).

Lozano-Bull (1987) corroborated the effects of low levels of self esteem found in Mexican-American women on the elevated levels of acculturative stress found. She also investigated the relationships among self-esteem and other psychological variables affecting the acculturative stress process.

Acculturative stress has been found to mediate the relationship between its antecedent, self esteem and depressive symptomology (Bass, 2003). Further, Hovey (2000) found a positive relationship between acculturative stress and depression in Mexican immigrants. Mexican Americans tend to have a higher expression of this mental health aberration than do non-Hispanic whites (Golding & Burnam, 1990; Moscicki, 1989; Roberts, 1994; 1995; Vernon, 1982). The addition of social support as a second antecedent is suggested due to the importance researchers place on this variable potentially ameliorating the strains associated with

acculturation (Williams & Berry, 1991). It's inclusion may be further tolerated as a suggestion of reality due to an acceptance of the assertion of Berry (1997), a noted researcher in this area, that there is not enough known at this point about those variables which affect acculturative stress to definitively classify them as being antecedents or moderators of the stress process or, indeed, to be highly specific of the role each plays in concert with others.

Self efficacy has been tested as a moderator of the positive influence of acculturative stress on depressive symptomology and the employee withdrawal behaviors intent to turnover and absenteeism (Bass, 2004). The variable was significant only in moderating the first of these relationships giving credence to the rationale that more generally efficacious migrants exhibit depressive symptomology less acutely than do other migrants. As stated previously, acculturative stress has been found to exert a significant influence on the most generally accepted measure of psychopathology—depressive symptomology (Bass, 2003; Hovey, 2000). This concept includes the measurement of mood, somatic complaints, interactions with others, and motor functioning. With its inherent inclusion of measurements of dysphoria, anhedonia, guilt, fatigue, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation, such a variable seems a likely outcome of the dysfunction of the acculturation experience.

Discussion

The migrant's adjustment to the new, Anglo dominated culture is described by the process of acculturation. The stressors that originate within its many areas of adjustment are components of acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is, in turn, influenced by a number of antecedents and moderators some of which have been previously discussed. This form of stress affects the outcomes of acculturation including new migrants' adaptation and survival or their failure to survive within the new culture. An examination of the interrelationships of these components is critical to understanding this attempt. There is a process of change from one way of life to another within the context of a different culture in a new geographical location. Failure to adapt can result in an unplanned and unintentional return to a homeland recently departed and to a way of life recently abandoned.

There is also a great potential for change within acculturating individuals as a result of their dynamic interaction with the new environment. The processes of appraisal, reappraisal, and coping inherent in this view describe how individuals manage stressors in their environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Acculturative stress is unique only in that the process of acculturation provides a unique set of stressors to which acculturating individuals are exposed.

It is a principle purpose of the present work to emphasize the value of the study and identification of variables which provoke and disanimate acculturative stress for the purpose of predicting or even influencing whether or not acculturation is successful in the Mexican migrant. The issue of the successful inclusion of this new entrant to the Anglo culture is particularly current.

As the US economy grows with a concomitant need for additional labor, migrants--whether or not officially sanctioned--enter a new culture with the hope and promise of a new, more abundant life and have the vulnerabilities which may predict a failure to adjust and succeed in the new land. Since social support ameliorates the expression and consequences of

acculturative stress (Williams & Berry, 1991), why not utilize Mexican familismo to potentiate the variable? When allowing immigration, why shouldn't family units be accepted as the increment of choice? On the other hand, when members of a criminal element enter a society, shouldn't their confinement include a separation from family or other institutions of support?

Further, as self esteem has strength to dissipate the effects of acculturative stress (Salgado de Snyder, 1987) shouldn't the courtesy and respect normally vested in the verbal discourse of a traditional Mexican background also be used in the new culture? This might easily be accepted by those with an interest in the success of new migrants. Further, doesn't this same group have an interest in suppressing even the slightest vestige of discrimination against the Latino?

Employers must have an interest in structuring jobs such that migrant workers build self efficacy as their ability to perform roles in the family are demonstrated by effort in the workplace. Efforts to elevate the status of the employee to whatever extent possible improve the likelihood of successful employment. These efforts may well presage the avoidance of employee withdrawal behaviors and predict less voluntary turnover and longer job tenure.

Finally, the effects of early problems in acculturating to the dominant Anglo culture can have long-term consequences for the migrant and the migrant's family. The pervasive effect of chronic depression in their lives may be reduced or avoided by the actions of individuals far from a clinical setting. Again, these individuals may be most realistically found among those with a personal stake in the adaptation and success of the recent migrant.

Conclusion

Nowhere in the acculturation literature is there a more fertile area for the expression for variables which hasten or impede acculturation than in factors which predict or lessen acculturative stress. The affect of these factors is potentially great as the remainder of migrants' lives may be improved or remain, to some extent, promises not completely fulfilled.

The application of the variables should predominately focus on the diminution of problems during acculturation. Secondly, factors which exacerbate cultural integration might be considered for those a society chooses not to welcome.

Finally, the application of these factors within migrants' acculturation is probably best early in the process. Their strength at this stage seems most likely to result in favorable, societal consequences.

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