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## Advocating for Integration: Acculturation in a Non-profit Serving Immigrants Organization

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# Advocating for Integration: Acculturation in a Non-profit Serving Immigrants Organization

## **Cover Page Footnote**

1. From now on as “The Organization” for confidentiality purposes of this document

# **Advocating for Integration: Acculturation in a Nonprofit Organization Serving Immigrants**

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents my own experience as a graduate student within a nonprofit organization serving immigrants<sup>1</sup> in a Midwestern city in the United States. During my academic process, I had the pertinent and enriching opportunity to volunteer as an ESL teacher at this organization as part of my teaching practicum and a Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities course, which were part of the required coursework of my master's program.

Although my teaching practices were directed to culturally and linguistically respond to the characteristics and needs of the organization's clients, I could identify certain aspects which implied an array of questions and reflections regarding not only the services offered at the organization, but also their purposes and outcomes. Certain practices seemed to foment the unidirectional process of acculturation (see Gordon, 1964, as cited in Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010) of the organization's clients. In other words, within a more critical lens, certain services, programs, and practices at this organization seemed to foster the *Americanization* of its clients.

However, it is noteworthy to assert that my intention is not, under any circumstances, to cast doubt on the quality and significance of the services offered at this organization. It would be irresponsible to ignore the commitment of this organization vis-à-vis its clients. Surely, without the existence and support of this type of organization, a considerable number of immigrants would feel adrift. Instead, it is my intention to reflect upon my volunteer and teaching experience, and the perceived practices of acculturation within this organization, proposing and utilizing a service-learning project as a resource to advocate for integration.

## **Culture, Immigrants, and Multiculturalism**

Given the characteristics of this paper, as well as my own experience, it is pivotal to consider some other important factors before approaching the concept of acculturation. It would produce insufficient and vague results to approach the perceived acculturation practices without considering broader elements that are embedded within: culture, immigrants, and multiculturalism.

Even though culture turns out to be a basic and essential concept in the field of social sciences, especially with regard to sociology and anthropology, its connotation seems to remain uncertain (Smith, 2016). There are yet "no universally accepted definitions of culture in general, paradigms for classifying cultures, or terminology used to discuss culture and its components" (Wilhelms, Shaki, & Hsiao, 2009, p. 96). However, despite the complexity that the concept of culture implies, it is essential to appeal to at least one of its diverse connotations to cement an understanding of what culture and acculturation practices signify.

As Moll and González (1997, as cited in Santa Ana, 2004) suggest, there exists a popularly accepted definition of culture which encompasses an array of elements, such as food, language, ethnic heritage festivals, and folklore. Although Moll and González's approach offers an approximation to the concept of culture, for the purpose of this paper, culture is understood and defined as something that

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<sup>1</sup> From now on this will be referred to as "the organization" for confidentiality.

...influences human behavior and belief as members of society. This influence, through processes and behaviors, affects how we make decisions and how we view the world. Culture is not part of our genetics; rather, it is a set of acquired and learned norms based on attitudes, values, and beliefs. (Ehrlich, 2000, as cited in Wilhems et al., 2009, pp. 97-98)

With regards to multiculturalism and immigrants, it would be possible to assert that there exists a relationship between them; multiculturalism, in my opinion, occurs to a certain extent due to the presence of distinct cultural groups within the same space. In this case, multiculturalism could be understood given the significant number of cultures and immigrants that shape the United States.

According to Goodkind and Foster-Fishman (2002, as cited in Yuying, 2010), the neighborhoods across the United States, in a certain way, seem to become increasingly diverse given the constant resettlement of both refugees and immigrants coming from several places around the globe. Similarly, Grieco and Trevelyan (2010, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2013) posit that between the years 2000 and 2009, the number and proportion of immigrants within the United States implied an increase by 24%, thus representing 13% of the foreign-born population of this country in the last decade.

This significant presence and representation of immigrants in the U.S. allows us to contemplate this country as a diverse and multicultural one. Without the presence of diverse cultural groups and the contact among them throughout the U.S., the process of acculturation would be hindered and even irrelevant. U.S. demographics regarding immigrant populations allow us to depict what multiculturalism implies.

Multiculturalism is thus conceived as a reiterative or dialogical process in which immigrants may adapt and change to a certain degree. Nevertheless, the host culture or social system itself also needs to adapt and modify in ways in order to accommodate these new practices and traditions that newcomers bring along with them (Hartmann, 2015). Within Hartmann's regard of multiculturalism, one would argue that beyond the mere presence of or contact among different cultural groups, multiculturalism implies a dual process for both the minority and majority groups. Newcomers would have to modify certain cultural repertoires and behaviors in order to adapt to the host culture, but majority groups also need to respond to, and eventually incorporate, those new cultural practices and beliefs of the immigrants.

The concepts of culture, immigrants, and multiculturalism become necessary to understand when discussing acculturation. In fact, the presence of and contact between different cultural groups, as well as their own culture, become pivotal to unveil and understand the practices and concept of acculturation. It is therefore necessary that "groups of people and their individual members engage in intercultural contact" (Berry, 2005, p. 697) in a particular context for acculturation to occur. Let us continue and examine the definition and understanding of acculturation.

### **Understanding Acculturation**

To put it succinctly, acculturation refers to the process in which both psychological and cultural change occurs from a determined contact between two different cultural groups and their respective members (Berry, 1980, as cited in Tam & Freisthler, 2015). Furthermore, Kelly (2016) states that acculturation responds to an internal process of change which immigrants experience as a result of the direct contact with members of a given host culture. Similarly, and perhaps expressed in more concise terms, acculturation signifies the change that either an individual or culturally similar group experiences from the contact with a different cultural group (McBrien, 2005).

By analyzing these definitions, it seems that acculturation responds to a process in which individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds experience change derived from their contact. However, early psychological models of acculturation are rather unidimensional and linear, considering acculturation as a process in which an individual *sheds* his or her own heritage culture and simply adopts the host culture (see Van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013). Hence, it is pertinent to reconsider to what extent all the cultural groups present and experience the same psychological, cultural, and even societal changes. Is acculturation an equal process for the involved individuals?

As stated by Gordon (1964, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2013), within a traditional and historical point of view, the concept of acculturation refers to an assimilation process in which immigrants would acquire the practices and repertoires of the receiving host culture, while simultaneously discarding their own cultural practices and heritage. Moreover, this historical conception of acculturation can be considered as a unidimensional and unidirectional construct since a group of individuals adopt the aspects of the dominant cultural group at the expense of their own native culture (Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980, as cited in Rahman & Rollock, 2004).

Considering this traditional construction of acculturation, one would assume that this is a unidirectional process in which one cultural group has to *fit into* the social and cultural system of a dominant group. In that regard, Ngo (2008) points out that this unidirectional and traditional approach implies the assimilation or absorption of subordinate groups into the given dominant cultural group.

Nevertheless, it is possible to encounter within the extant literature critiques and questionings regarding the unidirectional aspect of acculturation (see Berry, 2005, and Gordon, 1964, as cited in Ngo 2008). Some authors critically posit that albeit acculturation seems to have a greater impact on immigrants, this latter cultural group is oftentimes willing to initiate contact with the host society, participate in the life of the receiving society, and develop an openness to positive interactions with the members of the host culture (Ramelli, Florack, Kosic, & Rohmann, 2013).

Even though critical approaches and examinations recognize that acculturation is a multidimensional process with changes and consequences for both cultural groups, it still implies a greater impact on the nondominant group (Berry, 2001). Despite scholars and theoretical approaches which understand acculturation as a dual process with psychological and cultural change for all the parties involved, immigrants are the ones who still have to acculturate into the given dominant culture (Ngo, 2008).

### **Acculturation and the Organization**

This nonprofit organization serving immigrants has been offering different programs to its clients for more than 20 years. The organization is characterized by the quality, pertinence, and commitment of its personnel and volunteers regarding not only the development of its several services, but also the welfare of its respective beneficiaries—immigrants coming from an array of countries from Asia and the Middle East-.

Within this organization, one encounters a friendly and welcoming environment and personnel which includes, utilizes, and responds to the clients' sociocultural backgrounds as the cornerstone for the development of its different services. The clients' identities are absolutely welcomed and respected; their cultures, their languages, their religious beliefs, and even their own attires shape and cement this nonprofit organization.

The organization also offers 10 different programs for the community and the clients it serves: a computer education program, a seniors program, a youth development program, and a civics program, to name a few. Nonetheless, it seems that these various services and

programs promote the adaptation of immigrants to the receiving country's cultural norms and patterns (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, as cited in Cheung & Jahn, 2017). And this seems to foment the unidirectional process of acculturation.

Given the scope of this paper, and aligned to my own factual experience in this organization, it is my intention to present and concentrate on the adult literacy program for which I volunteered for a semester. The main purpose of this educational program is to provide the immigrants ESL classes in order to learn English and to *adapt* themselves to life in the U.S. The classes and the suggested curriculum are designed to prepare the students to learn and utilize English outside the classroom for daily-life purposes. Classes taught basic numeracy skills—numbers in English and U.S. currency—and conversations that are applicable in a real context—how to talk to the doctor, how to check out a book from the library, how to ask for the bill in a restaurant, as so on.

Within my duties as an ESL teacher, I taught a two-hour class once a week, and I was responsible for the language education of a multicultural and diverse group of 15-20 immigrant adults whose first language was one other than English. Thus, teaching and learning from students whose sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds were as diverse as mine presented one of the most challenging yet enriching experiences I could ever have as an ESL educator.

We have seen how the main objective and outcome of this program seems to be the production of proficient English language speakers who can communicate in mainstream U.S. society. This aligns with Schumann (1986), who states that acculturation also encompasses the psychological and social integration of the learners with the target language group. Clearly, this educational goal would not be considered as a problem per se; undoubtedly, the immigrants benefit from this pertinent service in the sense that they need to learn the language of their new host country. However, it is relevant to question whether these educational practices and services privilege some cultural repertoires over the others. Are we fostering and placing one culture over the other? Does this type of educational program consider students' first language for further development within the community? Is one culture and language more desirable than another? Does the community and mainstream society benefit from the immigrants' linguistic backgrounds?

Although the dynamics and process of acculturation generally place two distinct cultural groups together, the dominant group has greater power and influence over the acculturating group which experiences several forms of adaptation (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992, as cited in Dow, 2011). Some immigrants or minority groups may be willing to acculturate themselves to the host culture as a mechanism to adapt to the new conditions and practices of the receiving society and country. In fact, as Van Oudenhoven and Ward (2013) suggest, immigration encompasses a series of challenges concerning the maintenance of social cohesion, ensuring good rapport between immigrants and their hosts, and finding effective strategies for the newcomers to balance the issues of cultural maintenance with participation in the wider society.

However, beyond the classic, dominant, and unidimensional models of acculturation, it is worthwhile to inquire about the cultural maintenance and contact between immigrants and the host culture (see Ramelli et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to reflect upon acculturation as a dual process, rather than a dominance one.

Although acculturation is supposed to be a process that impacts both majority and minority groups, it would seem that acculturation has a greater impact on immigrants. It is relevant to question how the host community and society may benefit from the presence of new cultures and immigrants. Are we actually embracing the newcomers' cultural practices and repertoires, such as languages, religion, and gastronomy? Integration may be the answer.

## Advocating for Integration and Service-Learning Projects

Beyond the unidirectional aspects embedded in acculturation, Berry's classic taxonomy and model (Berry, 1974, as cited in McBrien, 2005) further explains the multidimensional characteristics of this concept. As stated by Celano and Tyler (1991), Berry's acculturation taxonomy presents and identifies four different types of acculturation that immigrants or nondominant groups may experience: (a) *assimilation*, (b) *integration*, (c) *separation*, and (d) *marginalization*. Even though this proposed taxonomy focuses on the immigrants or nondominant groups, it provides an alternative to the unidirectional, oppressive, and historical perspective of acculturation.

Broadly explained, assimilation occurs when the immigrant group or individuals do not consider maintaining their own cultural heritage and simply assimilate and receive the host culture. Integration occurs when there exists an interest in maintaining one's original culture and at the same time engaging, participating, and receiving certain aspects of the host culture. On the contrary, separation occurs when there exists an interest in holding on to one's native culture, thus avoiding the reception of and interaction with members of the host culture. Lastly, marginalization follows when immigrant individuals do not have any particular interest in either their own or the host culture (Berry, 2001).

I consider and propose integration as the response to the dominant and unidirectional acculturation practices of the aforementioned organization. Integration fosters one's identification with both nondominant and majority groups (Berry, 1990, as cited in Robinson, 2009). Actually, considering acculturation through the lens of integration would imply that "learning new cultural practices and beliefs does not necessarily have to interfere with the maintenance of existing ones" (Monzó & Rueda, 2006, p. 191). Rather than privileging one culture over the other, cultural groups and individuals should embrace and incorporate each other's culture. In this way, the cultural exchange and interaction would lead to the acculturation of all individuals and groups.

In the case of the organization, it is not merely about providing services to *Americanize* the immigrants. Although the programs and services become crucial for the well-being of the clients, it is also important to reconsider the unidirectional outcomes of the programs. The issue emerges when the immigrants are the only ones who experience acculturation. They are the ones who actually experience both psychological and cultural change, but what about the rest of the community? Are the other cultural groups—especially mainstream U.S. society—experiencing any type of cultural change due to the presence of and contact with immigrants? Is there a real context in which both minority and host groups learn from each other? If we consider culture as "a social construct characterizing the behavior and attitude of social groups" (Wilhems et al., 2009, p. 98), how are we changing our social constructions, behaviors, and practices based on immigrants' sociocultural backgrounds?

Advocating for integration is not an easy task. However, within the Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities course, I had the opportunity to elaborate on a service-learning project proposal to promote a broader integration between immigrants and the mainstream U.S. community. Considering the perceived unidirectional outcomes and acculturation practices within the organization's adult literacy program, my intention was to create a space for the students to engage with the community. This type of project intended to integrate the organization's clients with mainstream U.S. society—specifically in the community wherein the organization is located—in order to develop a bicultural relation which, according to Berry (2005), oftentimes entails learning each other's languages, sharing cultural food preferences, and even adopting characteristic social interactions of each group.

Thus, my service-learning project was intended to create a cultural cooking and recipe book, through which students would not only learn the English language, but also contribute to the development of the organization and a further integration with the community. Utilizing food as the cornerstone for English language learning and instruction would provide a pertinent opportunity for the students to learn from each other's culture—presented, in this case, in the gastronomy of their respective countries. Beyond the creation of a culturally relevant recipe book, the proposed service-learning project sought the creation and development of a gastronomic event within the organization in which all the staff, clients, and community would taste different cultural dishes and food.

In this context, creating a recipe book, and especially planning and carrying out a gastronomic event, provided the students a meaningful opportunity to gain insights into how this nonprofit organization works and its impact within the community. Additionally, and perhaps more relevant, this type of service-learning project would promote the integration of both immigrants and mainstream citizens by utilizing gastronomy as a basis for mutual cultural learning and understanding.

This would not only suggest an alternative to the unidirectional acculturation I perceived during my volunteer experience; it would also promote a bicultural or positive acculturation, which occurs when there exists an actual interaction between minority and majority groups, and when their respective cultures become blended (Berry, 2001, as cited in Kelly, 2016). Advocating for integration through the implementation of a service-learning project would lead to bidirectional learning in terms of culture; both immigrants and mainstream citizens interact and learn from each other. Immigrants and their sociocultural backgrounds deserve to be respected and valued. Mainstream U.S. society also has an array of cultural elements to learn from and incorporate.

### **Conclusion and Final Thoughts**

We have seen so far how acculturation practices occur within a nonprofit organization serving immigrants. Although it is undeniable the commitment of the organization to the welfare of its clients through the development and implementation of its services and programs, critical examination and reflection unveils certain practices that foster unidirectional acculturation.

Nevertheless, immigrants are individuals who possess enriching and diverse sociocultural and linguist backgrounds, which are worthwhile to learn from and incorporate into our own cultures and repertoires. It is our responsibility as educators to advocate for the quality of education and well-being of every single individual in society. Furthermore, the responsibility falls on us to unveil and denounce certain practices that perpetuate domination and oppression of minority groups.

Let us advocate for an actual integration—understanding and learning from cultural groups in this country. Let us cast doubt on and abolish unidirectional acculturation practices. Mainstream U.S. society also deserves to learn from immigrant groups and individuals.

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