Acculturation Theory

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Abstract

The impact of traumatic displacement resulting from war and disaster on refugees is well recognized in the research literature [8,10,14,15,24,32,40,55]. Findings of current research literature focus on the psychological distress of these traumatic life events for these individuals [50,55]. The effects of these events consist of many psychological stressors including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Acute Stress Disorder, anger, bereavement, depression, dissociative disorders, and anxiety [16,32,35,58]. Schwartz., *et al.* [49], affirm that an important aspect of acculturation is the perceived context of reception, which refers to the social and cultural environment in which the acculturation process occurs. Factors such as discrimination, prejudice, and social support can have a significant impact on how individuals and communities adapt to new cultural contexts. The definitions of Acculturation versus Assimilation will be discussed. Exploration of the cultural aspects and theoretical models of Acculturation will be introduced.

Keywords: *Acculturation Theory; Assimilation; Traumatic Displacement; Psychological Stressors*

Introduction

Conception of the processes of adjustment and integration of refugees into a new host country has long relied on the theoretical perspectives of acculturation. This paper examines the sole reliance on acculturation as explaining the processes experienced by refugees in that presently there appears to be no known model of acculturation which incorporates concepts that suggest an understanding of the impact that traumatic life-threatening experiences can have on one's adjustment and integration into a new host environment. Thus, this paper offers an analysis of three models of acculturation by examining the primary dynamics of the acculturation perspectives within the writings of Herskovits [21], Thomas and Znaniecki [56] and Berry [6]. Characteristics of acculturation as a theoretical perspective in relation to the research question will be included. The three models will then be analyzed for their inclusion of concepts related to trauma, specifically Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, subsequently supporting the research question: *"From a theoretical perspective has the trauma experienced by these refugees influenced their ability to acculturate into a new host society?"* Finally, the writer will provide policy and program implications.

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[1]Refugees are defined as individuals who are involuntarily displaced form their country of origin as a result of experiencing catastrophic natural disasters or man made events such as social or political oppression. In addition, these individuals cross over national precincts for the purposes of safety or fear of maltreatment in their country of origin (Ahern, 1995; Loewy, Williams, and Keleta, 2002).

There are more than 19 million individuals who currently seek refuge worldwide. They have been forced from their homelands because of traumatic experiences including civil war, genocide, and disaster [23,54,55].

The Asian refugee population has suffered tremendous hardship in their countries of origin forcing them to move to other countries without time to prepare for their travel to their new cultural surroundings. More than one million of these refugees have been directed to come to the United States because of political oppression. Acculturation difficulties upon arrival to the U.S. include serious mental health stressors including anger, depression, and anxiety that seriously affected their daily life functioning [35]. One of their major stressors for settling into a new environment is entering a new country and culture with dramatically differing ways of life [1]. This acculturation process into a new society only exacerbates the impact of traumatic events previously experienced in the country of origin or as part of the immigration process [35]. Some of these effects include, but are not limited to cultural shock, cultural change, isolation and goal striving stress [26].

Kamya's [23] research regarding African refugees living in the United States also suggests the need for coping mechanisms to overt the excessive stress associated with acculturating into a new society. Outcomes revealed that African refugees demonstrated the same range of associated stressors as other refugee populations previously studied (Nicholson, 1997; Chung, Bemak, and Wong, 2000). The acculturation difficulties that the African refugee populations experience include physical and psychological complexities, employment and social problems and limited strong social networks necessary for them to develop their sense of belonging. Acculturation theory incorporates specific aspects of this social network throughout the immigration process including issues related to specific cultures [7,29,43,60]. According to Loewy, Williams, and Keleta [29] exemplary of this are the "multiple traumatic experiences" that female African refugees go through in their countries of origin and on their journey to the United States (p.176). When these women finally reach their new homes, the process of adjusting is only compounded by the impact of the previous traumatic events.

In another study of 379 Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union residing in the United States, findings exhibited that gender and age of the individuals were associated with the challenges they experienced throughout their acculturation process. These individuals were forced to leave the former Soviet Union because of its totalitarian government practices and political oppression. Although this population was highly educated, employment retention rates were low for those between the ages of 51 - 54. The age of these refugees was considered to be associated with difficulties in learning the English language, which resulted in discrimination. Females were also more apt to have difficulty in obtaining employment in their host country. Because married female refugees had not received adequate vocational training prior to immigrating, they were more likely to be viewed as ill prepared, and their access to training and employment was still further limited [44].

These Asian, African and Jewish refugee populations are believed to experience a slower and more difficult process of acculturation which is associated with the traumatic events experienced prior to and during immigration. Like so many others, these refugees also face serious challenges including but not limited to learning a foreign language, employment barriers, and education. These added challenges hinder their ability to adjust and contribute to their new living environment [2,12,23,28,39].

Difficulties refugees face serious challenges including but not limited to inadequate housing, foreign language barriers, employment, and education difficulties. These impediments hinder their ability to adjust and contribute to their new living environments [2,12,23,28,39]. Difficulties associated with adjustment can subsequently lead to the need for continued government intervention, prolonged dependency and higher costs. Unfortunately, the capacity of government officials to understand and appropriately address the needs of these groups is hindered by the inadequate theoretical perspectives that do not explain the unique acculturation patterns of refugees. Without a better understanding of the unique acculturation needs of refugees, government is ill prepared to establish the responsive policies and programs needed to assist these displaced populations, including attention to the traumatic injuries experienced as refugees, along with prevention of further traumatic experiences and the smooth transition into the new host environment.

Acculturation vs assimilation

Acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological change that occurs when individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds encounter one another [6]. Acculturation involves changes in language, values, behaviors, and attitudes, and can have both positive and negative experiences for individuals and communities [30]. Although acculturation has been used as a theoretical perspective to support research on trauma and refugees, there is disagreement surrounding the utility of acculturation as the most appropriate theoretical perspective. Lending to this problem are the conceptual variations found in the literature regarding acculturation [43,52]. Some say acculturation as theory and assimilation as supporting concept, whereas others see assimilation as theory and acculturation as an aspect of assimilation [52]. This is important because theory helps us to understand human phenomena [43]. The lack of a clear theoretical framework challenges how one can engage in research related to refugees and other immigrant populations who have suffered traumatic events. This work can help to further the epistemological process of defining theory as it relates to understanding refugee populations, and subsequently may assist in identifying appropriate interventions.

Theoretical perspectives of acculturation

Theory provides a model of understanding phenomena. It evolves from human experience and perceptions to paradoxes [33]. The theoretical perspective of acculturation is defined as adjustment resulting from contact between cultures [36] describes acculturation as a "useful term for the processes by which aspects of elements of two cultures mingle and merge" (p. 6). Sam and Oppedal [48], agree with Lesser [21] asserting that acculturation is "reciprocal changes in individuals belonging to two cultural groups" (p. 1). Chun, Organista, and Marin [11] take the definition further to illustrate acculturation as a unification of two cultures. These two cultures, when incorporated, produce new foundational networks which combine the character traits and personalities of the original cultures. Chun., *et al.*'s [11] definition goes beyond the example of mixing cultures and focuses on changes in the "thinking processes" and emphasizes the way humans respond to the "process of mixing cultures." Cabassa [9] claims that when individuals enter into a new cultural environment, social and psychological transformations take place.

Acculturation, as a theoretical perspective has its beginnings in anthropology and sociology [12,21]. Exploration of the theoretical attributes of acculturation began in the early 1800s. At this time The Chicago School began to talk about the significance of the city's ethnic neighborhoods [56]. Associated with the University of Chicago, The Chicago School introduced this area of sociology to the United States in 1892. This new tradition of field research greatly influenced studies of "normal social behavior" rather than emphasizing problematic human histories [31,38].

Models of acculturation

Herskovits

Herskovits [21] developed his model based on the view of others. As such, Herskovits' model relies on Lesser who states that one culture overpowers another establishing a new blended culture with reciprocal relationships. He includes Parsons who bases his view on a dominant culture, overpowering the less dominant, creating a merged yet imbalanced culture group. Additionally, he relies on Krober, who introduces the process of diffusion, where both culture populations fuse together creating one enmeshed group. From these three perspectives Herskovits develops a model of acculturation which identifies two culture groups who merge, taking from and complimenting one another, in order to establish and sustain new cultural identity. A further examination of how each of these theorists contributed to the work of Herskovits follows.

Lesser [21], asserts that cultures adjust to one another over a period of time by developing new relationships. During the adjustment period both cultures find ways to adapt and unite in areas that complement and enhance the newfound cultural union. In his view of

acculturation, Lesser then explains that culture groups begin to dominate culture, overpowering a lesser culture group. This process is further clarified when the dominating culture group takes from and forces the lesser culture group to adapt to their new practices and ways of life.

Herskovits [21] also incorporates Parsons' view of acculturation. Parsons (as cited in Herskovits, 1958) emphasizes that one culture is already dominant and remains dominant. This culture then simply takes from the other. However, he adds that there is also a reciprocal exchange to this relationship. Parsons (as cited in Herskovits, 1958) argues that though one culture may be prominent and sometimes demanding towards the lesser culture, the lesser culture may receive benefits from the incorporation of the two cultures. This process would then make the relationship merged with one dominant culture in the forefront.

The last prominent figure that Herskovits introduces is Kroeber [21], who incorporates the term "diffusion" as an aspect of acculturation. Kroeber [21] defines acculturation with "diffusion" as a process of cultures adopting new ideas and thus making a new cultural environment. This "process" spreads as far as possible and includes both the old world as well as this new world. This process of diffusion is also described as an adaptation over the evolution of time [56].

The writings of Thomas and Zaniecki's [56] are best known for examining the acculturation of families who enter a new host environment with little or no social support. This narrative approach to acculturation uses the stories of impoverished Polish families who came to America in order to acquire a better future for themselves and their families. Before this account of immigrant history was written, immigrants were generally studied through surveys. The authors of <u>The Polish Peasant in Europe and America</u> "sought to explain social problems by examining the relation between individuals and their surrounding society...family neighborhood and other community ties" ([56] p. xii). These stories illustrate how Polish refugees wanted to hold on to the social, religious and historical beliefs that shaped their traditional way of life. Desiring to contribute to the family, these immigrants would live below their means which gave them as much monetary gain as possible. Meager living conditions enabled them to save as much money as possible to ensure the survival of their families. Family cohesion increased, and, generations continued to develop because of their close quarters.

These accounts contrast from the original methods used to study cultures immigrating to a new society. The difference is one that provides the expression of dynamic stories of a people's acculturation experiences in new surroundings. From the writings of Thomas and Znaniecki [56,57], it is apparent that the actuality of refugee acculturation occurs as a "process of societal development." Throughout the stories of struggle, tragedy and newfound awareness, Thomas and Znaniecki [56] point out how one group of refugees survived in a country that was constantly changing, growing and redeveloping into new sub-culture groups. Examining acculturation through the process of storytelling provides a unique understanding of the traumatic experiences of refugees as they struggle to adapt to their host environment [7].

Berry [7] provides a bio-psychosocial perspective of acculturation which is more concerned with individual mental and physical reactions to acculturation within a culture that is affected by external factors. In Berry's Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research [7], he describes a person who endeavors to maintain personal identity within a culture, yet still participates in a larger society. Berry discusses different societal strategies for the processes involved in this perspective. In figure 1, Berry uses the circle on the left to symbolize an individual who wants to remain exclusively connected to and preserve his/her own cultural identity, yet who realizes the necessity to live and work in a larger society. The circle on the right represents the larger society. Hence, the more and individual adapts to larger society, that same individual will draw farther away from the cultural identity of origin.

Phinney [6] goes deeper into ethnic identity in relation to acculturation. He takes into account a new "bicultural ethnicity" which is developed during acculturation processes. Berry [7] uses Phinney's work to develop a definition of "self" which occurs when cultures migrate into a foreign environment. The culture's homage to their country of origin is never forgotten during the acculturation process and

throughout their lifetime. Phinney's contributions agree with Berry's [6] inclusion of "relationships within a culture" and "maintenance of cultural identity" (p. 66).

The bio-psychosocial perspective of the acculturation process also includes factors of family influence and function which are believed to be impacted by migration. Factors of family influence and functioning include the impact on marriage. Parenting practices and sibling relations such as sibling interactions and attitudes are also indicators of bio-psychosocial family functioning [11]. Although, the bio-psychosocial perspective of acculturation does not specifically bring meaning to the question of trauma, "Has the trauma experienced by these refugees influenced their ability to acculturate into American society?" it does support an understanding of the interrelationship of emotions, social influences and biological factors.

Analysis of acculturation as a theoretical framework for understanding the traumatic experiences of refugees

The American Psychiatric Association [3] describes Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a developmental disorder which occurs in individuals after they experience a life threatening or severe traumatic event. This serious even may be a threat of physical harm to that individual or witnessed by an individual. For an example: a military person may experience physical injury during battle or witness the deaths of persons around him or her. The traumatic event is not limited to war or military combat. It also may include severe car accidents, physical or sexual assault, robbery, terrorist attack, natural or manmade disasters, or being diagnosed with a life threatening illness. Political refugee populations are known to have increased percentages of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder due to a reluctance to talk about specific details of their traumatic experience. Their reluctance is based on their immigration status and fear of retaliation of their home country. Specific attention is taken to ensure this population is given "concomitant symptoms" when being assessed (p. 465). These populations also include women refugees who experience further trauma throughout the immigrating process including discrimination and sexual assault [20]. Subsequently, acculturation is linked to a range of psychological outcomes, including well-being, identity formation, and intergroup relations. While there is evidence that acculturation can have positive effects on psychological well-being, the relationship between acculturation and mental health is complex and varies depending on a range of individual and contextual factors [61].

The following taxonomy analyses concepts of the three theoretical models of acculturation described earlier compared against the concepts of the phenomena of PTSD found in the DSM 5tr [3].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK COMPARISON				
	Herskovits (1958) Culture Contact	Thomas & Znaniecki (1996) Polish Peasant	Berry (2002) Bio-psychosocial	PTSD 309.81 (F43.10) DSM-5tr
CONCEPTS	Human contact			Restricted affect Physiological reactivity
	Relational	Relational	Relational	Social Avoidance
		Family cohesion Family Contribution	Family Influence	
	Assimilation			
	Diffusion	Tradition Story telling	Tradition	Concentration impaired
				Psychological distress Flashbacks/nightmares

Figure 1

As shown in the taxonomy above, all three of the theoretical models of acculturation have family unification and relational commonalities when compared to PTSD. The relational aspects in each model can be applied to the concept of social avoidance shown in the PTSD criteria. Developing relationships described within these models build a foundation which is the opposite of social avoidance. Furthermore, the relational aspects support the PTSD concept of psychological distress. Adaptation of the relational aspects in these three models of acculturation to psychological distress may aid in its decrease.

Further analysis of this taxonomy shows that traditional family aspects of all three models including Herskovits' (1958) concept of diffusion are similar to one another in helping refugees concentrate on positive family traditions and events that are relevant to each particular culture. These family memories/events assist in lowering psychological distress factors, subsequently creating new family tradition, furthermore, enabling these refugees to find new ways to share their personal traumatic experiences that they suffered throughout their acculturation process. This is facilitated because of their new found awareness of family support.

One of the ways that acculturation models are presented in the literature is by specific ethnicity or race. Research supports this view that each individual culture group has distinct characteristics of acculturation (e.g. Berry, 2002; Loewy, Williams, and Keleta, 2002; Papageorgiou., *et al*. 2000; Phinney, 2002; Williams and Berry, 1991). And, although the literature does have consistent reference to traumatic affects of acculturation, the theoretical perspectives describing the acculturation process do not incorporate concepts related to trauma to any significant extent. This suggests that that research related to the acculturation of refugees needs to include efforts to refine and develop more explanatory theories.

Discussion

Much needs to be done to address the ongoing needs of refugees. Appropriate policies and programs need to be developed to address these needs. However, until there is a more comprehensive understanding of how experiencing life-threatening events can impair the ability of refugees to successfully acculturate in a new host society, policies and programs for refugees are likely to fall short.

Recognition of the gap between cultural specific needs and programing historically is apparent. Illustrative of this, California US State Policy officials introduced updated policy tactics for immigrants at the California State Policy Seminar in 1993 (Smith and Tarallo, 1993). Officials stated that immigration policy would profit by updating physical health policies that surround immigrant families (Myers and Rodriguez, 2002; Smith and Tarallo (1993). In addition to policy, research on acculturation has advanced considerably in recent years, with a growing focus on the ecological context in which the acculturation process occurs. This approach emphasizes the role of cultural, social, and environmental factors in shaping the acculturation experience, and highlights the importance of considering multiple levels of analysis in acculturation research (Ward and Geeraert, 2016).

Further implications for immigrants with trauma included programs which increase culturally sensitive English and a second language educational development (Smith and Tarallo, 1993). Additionally, Berry (2002) discussed a "multiculturalism policy" addition, which "supports the maintenance of valued features of all cultures who would like to retain them" (p. 34). This may also be incorporated with the an updated physical health policy because of the specific physical health factors which affect different ethnic cultures who acculturate into a new country (Balls Organista, Organista, and Kurasaki, 2002). Although a revised model of acculturation which incorporates concepts related to PTSD is needed, utilizing the theoretical perspective of acculturation in refugee policy research would in turn help to combat language barriers, long term trauma effects, mental heath and physical limitations placed on them by acculturation processes (Myers and Rodriguez, 2002). Moreover, older adults should find it easier to acculturate into a society with added advantages for them. Smith and Tarallo (1993) assert that new programs could introduce culturally based mentoring for these persons. It would enable them to maintain their foundational cultural practices and share them with future generations.

Conclusion

Society will continue to have an influx of displaced individuals and families seeking a place to call home. Psychological distress as a result of traumatic displacement must continue to be addressed and analyzed in order for these individuals to receive the valuable services. These services are necessary for them to acculturate and survive in their new host environments. Acculturation continues to be a complex and dynamic process that involves multiple dimensions and levels of analysis. A better understanding of this will help to inform interventions and policies aimed at promoting positive intergroup relations and improving the well-being of individuals and communities in multicultural societies. Acculturation analysis represents a foundational thread of family cohesion and tradition, which, with continued research may prove to be crucial concepts for acculturation theory building practices. Policy and program developers must begin to initiate specific culturally sensitive programs for refugees and future displaced populations.

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