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THE ROLE OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT IN PREDICTING ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES

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Family environment, particularly family dynamics, plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' self-concepts, which in turn influence the development of their ethnic identity. Ethnic identity can affect how immigrants perceive both their heritage culture and the host culture. If individuals relate positively to their family, they are more likely to value their family culture, while negative family experiences may result in the rejection of their family culture. These familial experiences can also extend to influence interpersonal relationships outside of the family. A positive identification with one's own culture is often associated with more positive interactions with other cultures. This study revisits primary archival data on family environment and acculturation, providing a reinterpretation of the results through the lens of an updated literature review. It is hypothesized that the family environment can influence acculturation strategies such that more positive experiences lead to more positive acculturation strategies, and conversely, negative experiences may lead to more negative acculturation experiences. Analysis of the data partially supports these hypotheses, indicating that participants who reported more conflictual experiences with their family tended to reject their family heritage culture and adopt more stressful acculturation strategies, such as the marginalization strategy. However, a positive family environment was not a significant predictor of acculturation strategies. Additionally, age and years residing in the U.S. were examined as control variables. The discussion explores the implications of the findings in the areas of individual and family therapy.

Keywords: *acculturation, biculturalism, family conflict, family environment, integration, adjustment.*

Every year, millions of people around the world migrate to new places. Migration comprises many challenges and stressful factors, from the time migrants

make the decision to migrate to the process of migration itself, and through the post-migration period when migrants try to adjust to a new culture and life. The adjustment period during post-migration is one of the main psychological aspects impacting migrants, and it entails acculturative stress. Based on Berry's (1997) model, acculturation is the psychological and cultural process or outcomes that occur when two cultural groups come into contact. Acculturation is related to changes in attitudes and behaviors. Acculturative stress is a byproduct of this adjustment process. It can provide opportunities to grow and learn, but it can also be a factor impacting mental health. Acculturative stress can impact immigrants in different ways including physically (e.g., somatic complaints and insomnia) (Gonzalez-Guarda et al., 2021), or mentally (e.g., symptoms of depression) (Çimşir, & Kaynakçi, 2024). Family support can be a protective factor against acculturative stress and family conflict can be a risk factor that exacerbates the acculturative stress (Bekteshi & Kang, 2020).

Acculturation Theories

The literature on acculturation has looked at acculturation from different perspectives such as unidimensional, bidimensional, and multidimensional models.

The unidimensional model of acculturation views acculturation as the cultural change occurring along a single dimension, in which one side of the continuum is the heritage culture and the other side is the host culture (Ryder et al., 2000). The immigrant's acculturation is rated on this continuum. In this model, acculturation is a zero-sum equation: if a person's culture changes, it is thought of as losing their heritage culture and gaining knowledge of or adherence to the new culture (Cabassa, 2003).

The bidimensional model of acculturation posits that if the host culture is open to the migrant's culture, then migrants can simultaneously change in two dimensions (Berry, 1997). This model acknowledges that individuals can be bicultural or multicultural. The dimensions in this model include adhering to the heritage culture and learning or adapting to the host culture. These two dimensions can result in four acculturation strategies. Integration is the strategy in which the migrant adheres to both the heritage culture and adapts to the host culture. Separation is when the migrant adheres to the heritage culture and avoids interacting with the host culture. Assimilation is the strategy in which the migrant does not value maintaining the heritage culture and is interested in interacting with and adapting to the host culture. Marginalization is the strategy in which the migrant rejects both the heritage and host cultures. Of course, there are different levels of adherence to and adaptation of either the heritage or host cultures.

Studies show that individuals who adopt the integration acculturation approach experience the least stress, while those who adopt marginalization experience the

most stress (Berry, 1997). Individuals with assimilation and separation strategies experience intermediate levels of stress (Berry, 1997). The results of a systematic review by Choy et al. (2021), involving 21 studies and around 62,000 immigrants, showed that the marginalization strategy was associated with worse depression compared to integration, assimilation, and separation, with integration being the least associated with depression. Anxiety symptoms for marginalization were three times higher compared to the integration strategy, and the separation strategy increased the likelihood of anxiety symptoms by six times.

The multidimensional acculturation model defines acculturation as changes in values, identities, and cultural practices (Schwartz et al., 2010). In this approach, these factors can change independently or in combination. Values include changes in what an immigrant values, such as the type of family relationships, marriage, or preference between individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures. Identity can include preference between ethnic or national identity. Cultural practices can include practices such as language, rituals, and ceremonies. In this approach, acculturation is a more complex experience and is influenced by context (e.g., family or outside environment), and one can understand acculturation as changes across multiple factors.

There are multiple individual and societal-level factors that impact acculturation (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2006). Individual factors include demographic variables such as age, gender, and education, as well as language proficiency, and attitude and motivation toward acculturation (Berry, 1997). On the other hand, the societal context, including multicultural or assimilationist ideologies of the receiving society, discrimination and prejudice, and cultural distance, can also impact acculturation (Berry, 1997). Furthermore, personality traits and coping styles, as well as psychological resilience at the individual level, and ethnic and community support, along with the legal and institutional context at the societal level, may shape acculturation strategies (Berry, 2006).

The home environment and family dynamics are among the other factors that can impact both personality development and acculturation strategies.

Family Environment and Acculturation

The family environment is defined as the communication pattern, emotional climate, support systems, and organizational structure within the family that can shape how family members perceive themselves, others, and the world (Moos & Moos, 1994). This, in turn, can influence how family members handle stress, or how stress is exacerbated. Family dynamics, a key component of the family environment, refer to patterns of interactions, behaviors, emotions, and perceptions among family members, that influence these same patterns in other members (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). These dynamics can, in turn, shape the development of individual's social identity. One theory that can explain how

social identity relates to family culture is Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981). Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that social identity and self-concept are partially developed through group membership, which shapes behavior, in-group relationships, and perceptions. Social identities evolve through three processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. A sense of connection to a reference group, along with the group's positive reputation, is essential for the development of a stable and acceptable social identity. If the group fails to maintain a positive identity, individuals typically have three main paths: to leave the group, to try to change the group or its image, or adhere only to selective positive aspects of the group. Brown (2019), in their extensive review of Tajfel's legacy, concluded that Tajfelian SIT framework serves as a foundational lens in social psychology, highlighting the central role of group membership in shaping social identity. Research supports the notion that family dynamics significantly shape individuals' ethnic identity (Martinez et al. 2012; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1992; Sabatier, 2008). Since ethnic identity is a central factor in acculturation, we can conclude that the influence of family dynamics on ethnic identity can also impact acculturation strategies.

Ethnic Identity

Phinney (1990) and Phinney and Ong (2006) described ethnic identity as a component of social identity theory, and as both developmental and multidimensional. Ethnic identity has three components: cognitive (e.g., knowledge about one's ethnic group), affective (e.g., feelings or sense of pride about the group), and behavioral (e.g., engaging in cultural practices). Ethnic identity is developed through three stages: unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search/exploration, and ethnic identity achievement. A supportive family can encourage cultural practices, language retention, or ethnic pride, but a conflictual one can interrupt this process and lead to rejection of the heritage identity or weak commitment to it.

Marcia suggested that identity development can extend beyond the teenage years into adulthood (Marcia, 2002). Marcia describes identity development as involving both crisis/exploration and commitment going through the following four statuses: 1) identity diffusion (i.e., no exploration, no commitment) 2) Foreclosure (i.e., commitment without exploration) 3) Moratorium (i.e., active exploration) 4) Identity achievement (i.e., exploration plus commitment) (Marcia, 2002). A controlling and conflictual family environment may lead to identity developments that are less thoughtfully developed such as foreclosure or diffusion. From the perspective of acculturation strategies, these types of identities may correspond to a separation strategy in the case of foreclosure, and marginalization for diffusion.

On the other hand, acculturation strategies can lead to family conflict. In a study of more than 20,000 adolescents, there was strong evidence that when there

is a gap between the way parents acculturate and the way children acculturate, there is a decrease in family cohesion, and an increase in arguments (Harris & Chen, 2023). Also, a study by Choi et al. (2016) on Korean-American early adolescents showed that when the youth adopted a separation strategy, they had stronger parental bonds, when they had a modest bicultural strategy, (i.e., moderate levels of both mainstream and heritage orientation), they had the weakest family bonds and reported feelings of shame toward parents. Finally, if they had a high bicultural strategy (i.e., high mainstream and high heritage orientation), then they had strong family ties, high parental expectation, and parental sacrifices.

Based on existing evidence that the family environment can influence identity development, this study explores how the family environment may impact acculturation. Specifically, it addresses the following two research questions: 1) Can the family environment, in general, impact acculturation? 2) Does a positive family environment lead to more positive acculturation strategies, and a negative family environment lead to more negative ones?

To address these research questions, the study posits the following hypotheses.

H1: The family environment, as measured by the *Family Environment Scale* (Moos & Moos, 1994)—which comprises the constructs of Cohesion, Expressiveness, Conflict, Independence, Achievement Orientation, Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, Active-Recreational Orientation, Moral-Religious Emphasis, Organization, and Control—is predictive of acculturation strategies (i.e., Integration, Separation, Assimilation or Marginalization).

H1a: Positive family environment (e.g., high cohesion, expressiveness, and support; low conflict) are associated with more adaptive acculturation strategies, particularly integration.

H1b: Negative family environment (e.g., high conflict, low support) is associated with more maladaptive or stressful acculturation strategies, such as marginalization.

Methods

This study reanalyzed data originally collected in 2009, based on the author's master's thesis completed at California State University, Northridge. The data were reanalyzed, and the study includes an updated literature review and reinterpretation of the results.

The study recruited $n = 122$ university students who identified as first, second, or third-generation immigrants. The mean age was $M = 25.06$, $SD = 5.95$, with ages ranging from 18 to 48 years old. Participants self-identified as 83 female and 39 male. Participants were from 26 countries, including Iran (n = 41; 33.6%), Mexico ($n = 22$; 17%), Armenia ($n = 18$; 14.8%), El Salvador (n = 5; 4.1%), and the remaining participants (fewer than 5 participants each) from 22 other countries.

The number of years participants had resided in the U.S. ranged from 3 to 31 years (M = 15.36, SD = 7.48). Eighty-three (68%) participants identified as first-generation, 36(30%) as second-generation, and 3 (2%) as third-generation immigrants.

Procedures

Convenience sampling was used, and students were recruited from a Southern California university. The inclusion criteria required participants to be 18 years or older, and either first generation immigrants themselves or have at least one parent or grandparent who was a first-generation immigrant to the U.S. If participants met the criteria, they were given informed consent to sign and then asked to complete the survey.

The surveys included demographic questions such as age, years residing in the U.S., immigration generation status, household income, education, religion, country of origin, reason for migration, presence of children in the family, birth order, and the gender of participants and their siblings.

In addition, the *Vancouver Acculturation Index* (VAI; Ryder et al., 2000), and the *Family Environment Scale* (FES; Moos & Moos, 1994) were used to measure acculturation and family dynamics, respectively.

The VAI consists of 20 items, with 10 items assessing adherence to heritage culture and 10 items assessing adherence to host culture (Ryder et al., 2000). Items are presented on a Likert-type scale, on a continuum ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 9 (Strongly Agree), with intermediate values reflecting varying degrees of agreement. Examples of heritage culture adherence items include: "*I often behave in ways that are typical of my heritage culture*" and "*I often participate in my heritage cultural traditions*." Examples of host culture adherence include: "*I believe in mainstream North American values*" and "*I often participate in mainstream North American cultural traditions*". The Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency was, on average, .91 for the heritage culture subscale and .87 for the host culture subscale, based on multiple participants' cultural groups.

Family environment was measured using the *Family Environment Scale* (FES; Moos & Moos, 1994). The FES is a self-report measure consisting of 90 items, divided into three dimensions and 10 subscales. The dimensions include Relationship, Personal Growth, and System Maintenance. Each subscale contains 9 true/false items (1 point for "true," 0 for "false"), allowing a maximum score of 9 per subscale. The FES includes three forms—Real, Ideal, and Expected—that measure different perceptions of the family environment. In this study, the Real form was used, which assesses how participants perceive their current family context.

The Relationship dimension has three subscales, including Cohesion, with items like "*Family members really help and support one another.*"; Expressiveness, with items like "*We are usually careful about what we say to each other.*" *(reverse scored);* and Conflict, with items like "*We fight a lot in our family.*"

Personal Growth has five subscales, including Independence, with items like "*We are strongly encouraged to be independent.*"; Achievement Orientation, with items like "*In our family, personal success is emphasized.*"; Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, with items like "*We often talk about political and social problems.*"; Active-Recreational Orientation, with items like "*We often go out together to sports events or movies*,"; and Moral-Religious Emphasis, with items like "*We believe in a strict code of right and wrong.*"

System Maintenance has two subscales, including Organization, with items like "*We are generally very neat and orderly.*"; and Control, with items like "*There are set ways of doing things at home.*"

The scores can be interpreted at either the dimension level or the individual subscale level. In this study, the subscale scores were used for interpretation. The test-retest reliability scores ranged from .68 to .86 for different subscales over a two-month period, and internal consistency ranged from .61 to .78 across subscales.

Analysis

A total of three multinomial logistic regression (MLR) analyses were conducted to examine the data. The dependent variables were acculturation strategies, as measured by the VAI, categorized into four types: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The independent variables were the 10 subscales of the FES (i.e., Cohesion, Expressiveness, Conflict, Independence, Achievement Orientation, Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, Active-Recreational Orientation, Moral-Religious Emphasis, Organization, and Control). Age and years residing in the United States were included as control variables.

The three MLR models included: 1) age and years residing in the U.S. as predictors of acculturation, 2) Only reliable FES subscales, along with age, and years residing in the U.S. as predictors of acculturation, 3) Conflict subscale, age, and years residing in the U.S. as predictors of acculturation.

To determine the acculturation strategies, the following procedure was used. For each acculturation dimension, heritage and host, the maximum possible VAI score is 90 (i.e., a maximum score of 9 for each of the 10 items in each dimension). If the host culture dimension score on the VAI was above the mean (M = 71.66, SD = 14.03), it was considered "high" on host culture; if it was below the mean, it was considered "low." Similarly, if the heritage culture dimension score on the VAI was above the mean (M = 65.87, SD = .90), it was considered "high" on heritage culture and if it was below the mean, it was considered "low." Based on this: High

on both host and heritage was considered as integration, high on host and low on heritage as assimilation, low on host, and high on heritage as separation, and both low on heritage and host culture was considered as marginalization acculturation strategy.

Based on these criteria, and among 120 fully completed responses, the distribution was as follows: 44 participants (37%) adopted integration, 30 participants (25%) adopted separation, 28 participants (23%) adopted assimilation, and 18 participants (15%) adopted marginalization. This distribution is similar to findings reported in previous research (see Berry, 2006), where integration tends to be the most commonly adopted strategy and marginalization the least, with assimilation and separation being intermediate in frequency.

The reliability analysis for the FES subscales identified only five subscales within an acceptable reliability range of Cronbach's alpha $> .60$. These subscales included Cohesion ($\alpha = .632$), Conflict ($\alpha = .648$), Intellectual-Cultural Orientation ($\alpha = .642$), Moral-Religious Emphasis ($\alpha = .693$), and Organization ($\alpha = 711$). The other subscales, which had lower reliability scores, included Expressiveness ($\alpha = .516$), Independence ($\alpha = .472$), Achievement Orientation ($\alpha = .566$), Active-Recreational Orientation ($\alpha = .592$), and Control ($\alpha = .576$).

Results

A multinomial logistic regression (MLR) analysis was first conducted with age and years residing in the U.S. as the predictor variables and the four acculturation strategies as the dependent variable (integration as the reference category). The results of this analysis showed that the overall model was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 19.92$, $p < .01$. The model demonstrated small explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .17$). Years residing in the U.S. was a marginally significant predictor of acculturation strategy, $\chi^2(3) = 7.34$, $p = .06$, while age was a significant predictor, $\chi^2(3) = 12.21$, $p < .01$. Older participants were more likely to adopt the assimilation ($B = .15$, odds ratio (OR) = 1.17, $p < .01$) or separation ($B = .11$, OR = 1.11, p = .05) strategies compared to the integration strategy. Longer residence in the U.S. was associated with lower odds of adopting the separation strategy compared to integration, ($B = -.08$, OR = 0.92, $p = .02$).

The second MLR model included the following predictors: age, years residing in the U.S., and only FES subscales that had high reliability ($\alpha > .60$), which included Cohesion, Conflict, Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, Moral-Religious Emphasis, and Organization. This model was a significant fit, $\chi^2(21) = 45.50$, $p < .01$, with a moderate level of explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .35$). However, only age ($p = .014$) was a significant contributor. The FES Conflict subscale had a marginal effect ($p = .067$) but was not statistically significant contributor to the overall model. Age remained a significant predictor, increasing the odds of adopting the separation ($B = 0.12$, OR = 1.13, $p = .04$), and assimilation ($B = 0.17$,

OR = 1.18, $p < .05$) strategies, compared to integration. Conflict was a significant predictor of the odds of marginalization (*B = .073,* OR = 1.076, $p = .05$) compared to integration. Years residing in the U.S. and the other reliable FES subscales were not significant predictors for acculturation strategies. H1, was partially supported, but H1a, was not supported.

The third MLR model included age, years residing in the U.S., and the FES Conflict subscale scores as predictors. The model was a significant fit, $\chi^2(9) = 34.36$, $p < .001$, with a moderate level of explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .27$). Age, $\chi^2(3) = 12.31$, $p < .01$, and Conflict, $\chi^2 (3) = 14.44$, $p < .01$, were significant contributors to the model. However, years residing in the U.S. was not a significant contributor to the overall model, $\chi^2(3) = 7.32$, $p = .062$. Age remained a consistent predictor for assimilation (*B = .162,* OR = 1.18, $p < .01$) and separation (*B = .107,* OR = 1.11, $p = .05$) compared to integration. In this model, longer residence in the U.S. was a significant predictor of lower odds of marginalization (*B* = -.086, OR = 0.92, $p < .05$) and separation (*B = -.076,* OR = 0.93, $p < .05$), relative to the integration. Conflict was also a significant predictor of reduced odds of endorsing the separation strategy (*B = -.073,* OR = 0.93, $p = .01$), compared to integration. These findings support H1b: that a negative family environment (e.g., high conflict) can predict maladaptive acculturation strategies such as marginalization.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the impact of family environment on acculturation strategies. It was study hypothesized that the *Family Environment Scale* (FES) would predict the likelihood of adopting a specific acculturation strategy. More specifically, it was proposed that positive aspects of family environment would lead to more adaptive acculturation approaches, such as integration, whereas problematic family environment would lead to more maladaptive acculturation strategies, including marginalization, and to a lesser degree, assimilation and separation. The overall hypothesis was partially supported, such that not all aspects of family environment, particularly the positive aspects, significantly predicted acculturation strategies. However, a negative aspect, as measured by the Conflict subscale, was a significant predictor of the marginalization acculturation strategy and was also associated with a reduction in the separation strategy. Overall, the results aligned with expectations and offered a meaningful understanding of how the family environment can influence acculturation strategies.

Age was a consistent predictor across multiple models, influencing the likelihood of participants adopting assimilation and separation strategies, independent of years residing in the U.S. Older immigrants were more likely to endorse assimilation or separation strategies. This finding is consistent with the literature, which notes that adopting an integration strategy often requires greater cognitive flexibility or adaptability, traits more commonly found in younger

individuals (Berry, 1997). In addition, older immigrants may have a stronger sense of connection to their heritage culture, making them more inclined to adhere to the heritage culture more than the host culture, and hence adopt a separation strategy.

In one of the models, years residing in the U.S. was a predictor for lower odds of separation and marginalization compared to integration. However, years residing in the U.S. was not a significant contributor to this model and should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, this trend is theoretically consistent with existing literature, which suggests that the longer immigrants reside in the host country, the more likely they are to adopt assimilation or integration strategies (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Not all of the FES subscales demonstrated acceptable reliability. Only Cohesion, Conflict, Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, Moral-Religious Emphasis, and Organization subscales met the reliability threshold. When these reliable subscales were included in the MLR model along with age and years residing in the U.S., the model fit was significant, with age being a significant contributor to the model and Conflict being a marginally significant contributor. In this model, higher family conflict predicted greater odds of adopting the marginalization strategy. This is also consistent with prior research, which suggests that increased conflict in the home environment may hinder the development of a strong self-concept needed to navigate both own's and the dominant cultures. As a result, individuals may feel disconnected from both the heritage culture and the host culture, leading to marginalization (Cano et al., 2014).

In the final MLR model, which included only age, years residing in the U.S., and the Conflict subscale as predictor variables, the model fit remained significant. Both age and Conflict were significant contributors to the model, while years residence in the U.S. was a marginal contributor. In this model, Conflict significantly predicted lower odds of adopting the separation strategy compared to integration. The Conflict subscale includes items related to criticism, anger, and disagreement, and higher scores on this subscale may indicate lack of acceptance within the family. This finding supports existing literature suggesting that family conflict will reduce family cohesion and support, which are essential components of identification with the heritage culture, and thus may weaken an individual's motivation to adopt the separation strategy (Ferenczi et al., 2015).

The implications of these findings, particularly that family conflict can lead to more problematic acculturation strategies, are significant for individual and family therapists. Understanding how the family environment and dynamics influence acculturation can help clinicians more effectively assess and develop treatment plans that address the reciprocal relationship between acculturative stress and family conflict. Clinicians can support individuals in increasing their awareness of

how acculturative stress and family dynamics interact (Santisteban et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2010), which may help reduce family conflict by alleviating stress.

Additionally, immigrants who choose to migrate at a younger age may benefit, as younger individuals appear more likely to adopt an integrative acculturation strategy, which is generally less stressful than assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

Future studies should examine specific cultural groups separately to explore how culturally unique family dynamics influence acculturation strategies. Research should also investigate the interaction between family conflict and family support, and how their combined effects shape acculturation. Furthermore, family stress can be studied as a potential push or pull factor influencing acculturation paths. Finally, longitudinal studies are recommended to better capture the evolving impact of family dynamics on acculturation over time.

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ԲՈՎԱՆԴԱԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ * СОДЕРЖАНИЕ * CONTENTS

ANNA ALEKSANYAN THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL MATURITY ON FAMILY STABILITY 3

ANNA NADOYAN, ANAHIT STEPANYAN THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF OLDER ADULTS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS 15

AREVIK HEBOYAN THE INFLUENCE OF ESG METRICS ON INVESTOR BEHAVIOR AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS THROUGH THE LENS OF MENTAL HEURISTICS 24

GEORGE GHARIBIAN THE ROLE OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT IN PREDICTING ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES 37

HRANT AVANESYAN, VIOLETA MOSINYAN-MEIER PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILES OF STUDENTS MAJORING IN HUMANITIES: CLUSTER ANALYSIS 50

YURY CHERNOV, RUBEN AGHUZUMTSYAN FORMALIZED HANDWRITING ANALYSIS AS A COMPLEMENTARY TOOL IN FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT 67

Հոդվածներին ներկայացվող պահանջները 79