

Acculturation: A Third Dimension

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Abstract

The following is a theoretical model that assists in conceptualizing a recent phenomenon of Native Mexican Indian families living on the borderlands and attending schools in the United States. The foundation for the model is taken from Matthiason's (1968) two culture matrix model, with the added dimension of the "z" axis encompassing the third culture.

As the demographics along the borderlands continue to change, one interesting phenomenon is impacting how we assess and intervene with children. The trend that seems to be occurring with increased frequency is the immigration of Native Mexican Indian families (descendants of the Aztecs and Mayans). What is of great interest is the truly multicultural experience the children who are now attending school are living on a daily basis.

Statement of the Problem

These immigrant students have as their native culture, the Native Mexican Indian "cultura" and are now living not only the "Norteno" Mexican culture in the border community they reside, but also the American culture while attending schools in the United States. Although not a new trend, it is essential to understand this exists, as these children are now also being referred for special education testing and possible qualification for services (i.e., Padilla, 2001). In conducting a nondiscriminatory assessment, one must understand the issues surrounding cultural competency (Miranda, 2002; López, 2003). Vázquez (1997) notes that knowledge of world view; ethnic identity and acculturation are the key constructs for evaluation, interpretation of results and integration for effective interventions within the school setting (López). For the student functioning within the tri-cultural situation, school personnel along the borderlands must be able to understand the conceptualization of such happenings.

Definition, Process and Conceptualizations

A review of acculturation and conceptualizations is the starting point. As defined by Merriam-Webster (1984), acculturation is the "cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture" (p. 50). As indicated in the definition and by Padilla (1980), it can occur at the individual or group level and first occurs through contact with another culture. For the Native Mexican Indian students, this seems to occur when they move into communities with Northern Mexican influences and also when they begin school in the United States.

As the students experience the new cultures and the demands that come with each culture, they may experience acculturative stress (Padilla, 1980; Vázquez, 1989; Dana, 2001), which is characterized as the conflict between different expectations, rules, and norms from each culture. For example, the students in this discussion may be expected to speak their native tongue while at home, Spanish in the community and English while at school. Language, although a very important aspect of culture, is not the only factor to consider. The confusion and struggle between the three distinct norms can cause issues that mimic emotional disturbance, learning disabilities and speech and language impairments (Dana, 2001; López, 2003). As indicated by Padilla, the students can adapt by changing to resemble the dominant culture or cultures, retorting and functioning within the new cultures but maintaining native cultural beliefs or retreating to either their native culture or the Mexican culture.

Several conceptualizations of a "bi" culture view of acculturation have been developed. McFee in 1968 developed the single continuum perspective, where individuals fall on points along a continuum. The points are identified as unacculturated (maintaining native culture), bicultural (maintaining both cultures) and acculturated (adapting to new/dominant culture). Matthiason (1968) developed a two culture matrix model, where the x-axis refers to the new culture and the y-axis the native culture. The end of each axis is labeled high and each axis is labeled low where they intersect. The matrix is separated into four quadrants: unacculturated (where individual is high on native culture, low on the new culture), bicultural (high, high), acculturated (low native culture, high new culture) and lastly, the marginalization (low, low). As described in the previous model, the first three points are consistent in their characteristics, with the marginal person not identifying with either culture.

Padilla (1980) conceptualized the multidimensional model that looked at individual traits from the two cultures that the individual was functioning within. Of the three conceptualizations, the two culture matrix model that has continued to be discussed and has been operationalized (Matthiason, 1968; Cuellar,

Arnold & Maldonado, 1995; Kim & Abreu, 2001). However, it continues to only look at two cultures at a time. To assist in understanding these recently immigrated students from central and southern Mexico, an addition to a current model is essential.

The Third Dimension

The third dimension is integrated into the two-culture matrix conceptualization, by adding a “z” axis. The visual representation is a mathematical view of a z axis that intersects with the x and y axis, and extends outward, representing the third cultural influence/experience. Table 1 is a description of the three dimensions and how a “tri-cultural” student may fall within each culture and how to distinguish each cultural adaptation. Table 2 provides theoretical characteristics associated with each acculturative type (designations). This assists school personnel in understanding possible issues/factors that the students may be facing within each dimension or while trying to function within all three of the cultures.

These acculturative types are determined through the assessment of the major factors associated with ethnic change, as reported by Padilla (1980). It is evaluating the traits associated with language, cultural attitudes and beliefs of self and others, as well as cultural relations and experiences. Although theoretical at this stage, this model could be operationalized through ethnographic interviews (Luis Vázquez, personal communication, 2002; López, 2003).

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Understanding the culture of students living along the borderlands is essential in conducting culturally competent assessments (i.e., Miranda, 2002; Ortiz & Flanigan, 2002; López, 2003). The unique cultural experiences of some Native Mexican Indian students add to the already complex issues associated with multicultural assessment. One means of dealing with this phenomenon is by understanding components that comprise the student’s life, possibly on a daily basis. It is this third dimension of acculturation that staff may overlook when attempting to address the cultural influences impacting success in the school setting. Lacking this vital data could lead to misidentification of students being referred for special education services, adding to the already high number of inappropriately assessed students within the American school system (Padilla, 2001). Identifying the third dimensional effects could also assist in providing appropriate pre-referral and referral interventions. Support groups and discussions with families could reduce acculturative stress and could be the link between schools and families along the border.

*Table 1
Description of the Three Dimensions and Designated Acculturative Types*

Acculturative Type	Native Culture	New Culture	New Culture
Native Amer.	Mexican	American	
Multi-Acculturated	High	High	High
Bicultural Native-American/Mexican	High	High	Low
Enculturated to the Native American Culture	High	Low	Low
Marginal	Low	Low	Low
Bicultural Mexican			
American	Low	High	High
Bicultural Native American/American	High	Low	High
Acculturated to the Mexican Culture	Low	High	Low
Acculturated to American Culture	Low	Low	High

Table 2

Theorized Characteristics Associated with each Acculturative Type

<i>Acculturative Type</i>	<i>Theorized Characteristics</i>
Multi-Acculturated	Highly acculturated to the three cultures. Individual or group may speak three languages Maintain and adopt values and traditions of native culture and new cultures.
Bicultural Native American/ Mexican	Maintain the native cultural values and beliefs and adopt those of the Mexican culture. May or may not be bilingual.
Enculturated to the Native American Culture	Maintaining Native cultural values and traditions. May be maintaining and communicating native language.
Marginal	Not identify with neither of the three values/beliefs. May not identify with any culture.
Bicultural Mexican American	Adopting both Mexican and American cultural beliefs and traditions.

Theorized Characteristics Associated with each Acculturative Type

<i>Acculturative Type</i>	<i>Theorized Characteristics</i>
	May choose to only speak Spanish and English.
Bicultural Native American/ beliefs and adopt those of the American	Maintaining Native cultural values and culture. May be bilingual.
Acculturated to the Mexican Culture	Adopting the Mexican cultural beliefs and traditions. May only choose to speak Spanish
Acculturated to American Culture system.	Adopt the American value and belief May choose to only speak English.

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