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The Missing Side of Acculturation: How Majority-Group Members Relate to Immigrant and Minority-Group Cultures

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Jonas R. Kunst[1], Katharina Lefringhausen[2], David Sam[3], John W. Berry[4,5] & John F. Dovidio[6]

1. Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway
2. Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK
3. Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Norway
4. Department of Psychology, Queen's University, ON, Canada
5. Higher School of Economics, International Center for Sociocultural Research, Moscow, Russian Federation
6. Department of Psychology, Yale University, CT, USA

Please address correspondence to Jonas R. Kunst, j.r.kunst@psykologi.uio.no, Postboks 1094, Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway

Abstract

In many countries, individuals who have represented the majority group historically are decreasing in relative size and/or perceiving that they have diminished status and power compared to those identifying as immigrants or members of ethnic minority groups. These developments raise several salient and timely issues including: (a) how majority-group members' cultural orientations change as a consequence of increasing intercultural contact due to shifting demographics; (b) what individual, group, cultural and socio-structural processes shape these changes; and (c) the implications of majority-group members' acculturation. Although research across several decades has examined the acculturation of individuals identifying as minority-group members, much less is known about how majority-group members acculturate in increasingly diverse societies. We present an overview of the state of the art in the emerging field of majority-group acculturation, identify what is known and needs to be known, and introduce a conceptual model guiding future research.

Keywords: acculturation; integration; intergroup contact; majority group; multiculturalism

The Missing Side of Acculturation: How Majority-Group Members Relate to Immigrant and Minority-Group Cultures

Acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological change caused by intercultural contact (Berry, 1980, 2018). Theoretically, it involves mutual accommodation both by those identifying as minority-group members and those identifying as majority-group members. However, research has primarily focused on the cultural changes that people identifying as immigrants or minority-group members[1] experience (Sam & Berry, 2016). In a period of unprecedented demographic changes that are impacting societies globally, understanding the *how*, *when*, and *why* majority-group culture is influenced by people identifying as immigrants or minority-group members is important and timely.

Minority-Group Acculturation

Much psychological research on acculturation has drawn on a fourfold model of acculturation (Sam & Berry, 2016). While this model acknowledges within-group variability, its focus is on systematic between-group differences and has been applied mainly with respect to orientations to two cultures – minority-group and majority-group cultures. Relevant research shows that people identifying with immigrant or minority-group cultures regularly use four basic acculturation strategies. Individuals who follow the strategy of *integration* (i.e., the most preferred strategy) maintain their heritage culture while also adopting the mainstream majority culture of their society of residence. Those pursuing the strategy of *assimilation* give up their heritage culture in favor of the mainstream culture. People following the strategy of *separation* maintain their heritage culture while rejecting the mainstream culture. Finally, those who neither

[1] Please note that we use this term for simplicity, while acknowledging the heterogeneity within and across these groups.

maintain their heritage culture nor adopt the mainstream culture are employing the strategy of *marginalization*.

The much more limited acculturation research on the majority group has primarily considered its members' resistance to changes in their culture, and their expectations and preferences concerning how people identifying as immigrants or minority-group members should acculturate (Bourhis et al., 1997; Zárate et al., 2012). Research rarely considers the acculturative changes experienced by majority-group members.

Majority-Group Acculturation

Drawing on definitions applied primarily to the field of minority-group acculturation (e.g., Berry, 2018; Redfield et al., 1936), we define majority-group acculturation as the cultural and psychological changes that current or former majority-group members experience, and the cultural styles they adopt as a result of contact with people identifying as immigrants or ethnic minority-group members living in the same society. Importantly, majority-group acculturation is not simply the recognition of minority-group culture. Rather, it involves the genuine incorporation of aspects of minority-group culture into majority-group members' default cultural repertoire, ultimately leading to changes in the mainstream culture at the societal level.

One central way in which majority-group acculturation differs from how minority-group acculturation has commonly been conceptualized is that it involves cultural and psychological changes stimulated in concert by contact with members of multiple, diverse groups. That is, current or former majority-group members who have contact with members of different minority groups over time may adopt elements of various ethnic cultures to different degrees. As such, majority-group acculturation focuses on the influence of multiple heritages, which are present in

many contemporary, highly diverse contexts of acculturation (Doucerain et al., 2013; Doucerain, 2019).

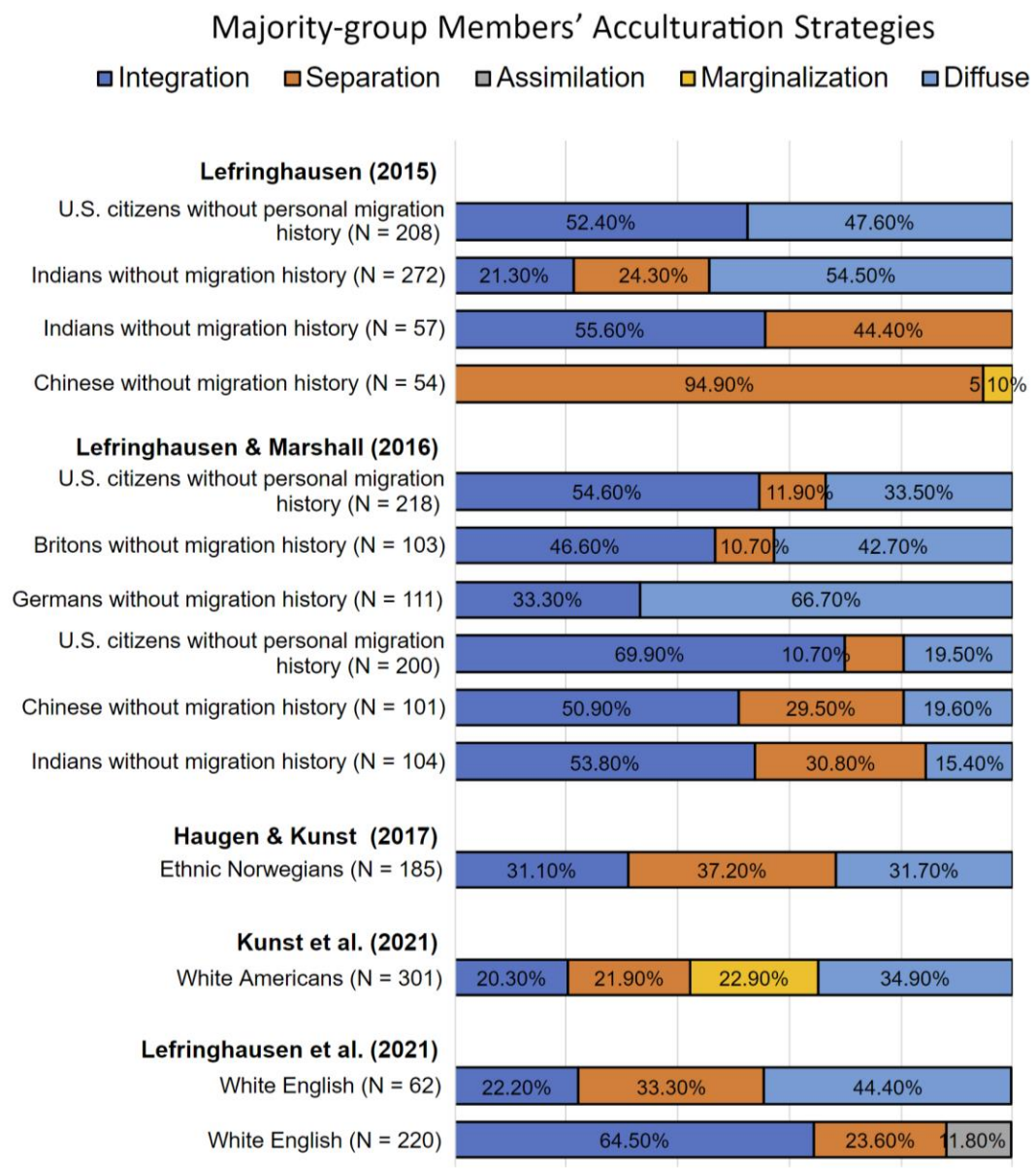
Majority-group acculturation can occur at an individual level, represented by changes in personal practices, values, and identity (Schwartz et al., 2010), and/or at a societal level, for example reflecting changes in language or norms. With respect to individual-level practices and values, as majority-group members repeatedly interact with minority group members, they may engage in new cultural practices (e.g., non-Jews may celebrate Hannukah, non-Muslims may fast together with their friends during Ramadan), prefer different food products (e.g., halal), or explore and even convert to different religions. Through intercultural friendships and romantic partnerships, norms for intercultural contact can change at the societal level (Christ et al., 2014). Linguistically, majority-group members, and particularly those of younger generations, may adopt new expressions and pronunciations, which at the societal-level sometimes results in entirely new dialects. Regarding identity, majority-group acculturation can create changes in the way a group and its members perceive their defining characteristics. Such changes can concern the specific nature of an identity: For example, a significant percentage of residents of New Mexico identify with the *Hispanos* culture of the state, a historical blend of Spanish and U.S. cultures. Majority-group acculturation can also affect the structure of cultural identity, leading to greater cultural identity complexity (e.g., as more multicultural). Thus, through the process of majority-group acculturation, the way people identify with mainstream culture may become more inclusive, complex, and permeable (Lefringhausen et al., 2021).

Current evidence suggests that majority-group acculturation differs in important ways from minority-group acculturation. People identifying as members of majority groups tend to adopt only two of the four strategies commonly observed among those identifying as immigrants

or minority-group members. As displayed in Figure 1, a sizable proportion of majority-group members follows the strategy of integration, adopting elements of immigrant and other minority groups' culture while also maintaining their majority-group culture. However, a considerable percentage of majority-group members endorses the strategy of separation, orienting themselves towards their majority-group culture, while rejecting the culture of those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members. Assimilation and marginalization seem rarely used by majority-group members.

Figure 1

This figure presents the acculturation strategies that majority-group members followed in a series of studies. As becomes visible, a larger number of people indicates that they maintain their majority-group culture while also adopting aspects of immigrant and minority-group cultures (i.e., integration). A sizeable group of participants maintains their majority-group culture while rejecting the culture of those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members (i.e., separation). Only in one study did some participants give up their majority-group culture in favor of the culture of those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members (i.e., assimilation), and only rarely did participants reject both cultures (i.e., marginalization). Strikingly, in most studies, a diffuse cluster was identified, in which participants showed no clear preference for any of the four acculturation strategies.



In further contrast to work with people identifying as immigrants or minority-group members, a substantial percentage of majority-group members shows no clear-cut preference for any of the four previously-identified strategies. This "diffuse strategy" is, in fact, one of the most common characterizations of majority-group acculturation in the reviewed studies (see Figure 1).

Distinctive Processes in Majority-Group Members' Acculturation

There are at least two elements that critically distinguish majority-group acculturation from minority-group acculturation. First, majority-group acculturation requires changes to the traditional culture of a society and its status quo. Second, the majority group typically has more power (i.e., social, political, and economic) than those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members (Berry, 1980). Psychologically, people tend to adhere to the status quo that is known and understood rather than to pursue change, which is often uncertain. Consequently, change stimulated by the increasing presence and potential influence of people identifying as immigrants or minority-group members is commonly perceived as a threat to the higher status of the majority group (Verkuyten, 2006), leading its members to reinforce traditional values (Craig & Richeson, 2014). These processes have implications for both *when* and *how* majority-group members acculturate.

There are several conditions that may increase majority-group members' willingness to change their own group's culture. At the level of individual differences, more open-mindedness, stronger growth values (e.g., caring about the welfare of all people), and less conscientiousness are associated with greater adoption of cultures of those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members (see Table 1). Moreover, having more frequent and, importantly, higher quality intercultural contact, being more culturally sensitive, and perceiving immigration more as an enrichment than a threat are associated with more culture adoption. At the group and cultural level, having a stronger global identity (e.g., identifying with a common humanity) and being more ethnorelativist (i.e., showing high cultural empathy and tolerance), as well as being less ethnocentric and nationalistic, are linked to greater cultural adoption.

Many of the aforementioned factors show the opposite relationship with majority-group members' maintenance of their majority culture (see Table 1). Concerning individual differences, openness is related to less cultural maintenance, and emotionality and extroversion to more; concerning group factors, having less global identity, less intergroup contact, perceiving immigrants more as a threat, and holding a stronger national identification are related to more majority-culture maintenance. Ethnocentrism was not significantly associated with majority-group culture maintenance in previous research, suggesting that this orientation may not need to reflect a prejudiced mind but rather an attempt to conserve one's culture during times of change.

Table 1

Variables Associated with Majority-group Members' Adoption of Other Cultures and the Maintenance of Their Majority Culture.

Variable	Type of Association with		Reference
	Other Culture Adoption	Majority Culture Maintenance	
Social Identity			
Global Identity	+	-	Lefringhausen et al. (2021)
Ethnorelativism	+	+	Lefringhausen and Marshall (2016)
National Identity	-	+	Lefringhausen et al. (2021)
Ethnocentrism	-	Ns	Lefringhausen and Marshall (2016)
National Identity	Ns	+	Lefringhausen and Marshall (2016)
Intergroup Relations			Lefringhausen and Marshall (2016)
Intergroup Contact	+	NA	Lefringhausen et al. (2020)
Intergroup Contact	+	-	Lefringhausen et al. (2021)
Positive Feelings toward Immigrants	+	-	Lefringhausen et al. (2021)
Intercultural Sensitivity	+	+/Ns	Lefringhausen and Marshall (2016)
Perceived Enrichment	+	-/Ns	Lefringhausen et al. (2021)
Perceived Threat	-	+	Haugen and Kunst (2017)
Perceived Threat	-	NA	Lefringhausen et al. (2020)
Perceived Threat	-	+	Lefringhausen et al. (2021)
Perceived Discrimination	-	+	Haugen and Kunst (2017)
Personality & Values			
Openness	+	-	Kunst et al. (2021)
Growth Value	+	NA	Lefringhausen et al. (2020)
Conscientiousness	-	Ns	Kunst et al. (2021)
Extraversion	Ns	+	Kunst et al. (2021)
Emotionality	Ns	+	Kunst et al. (2021)

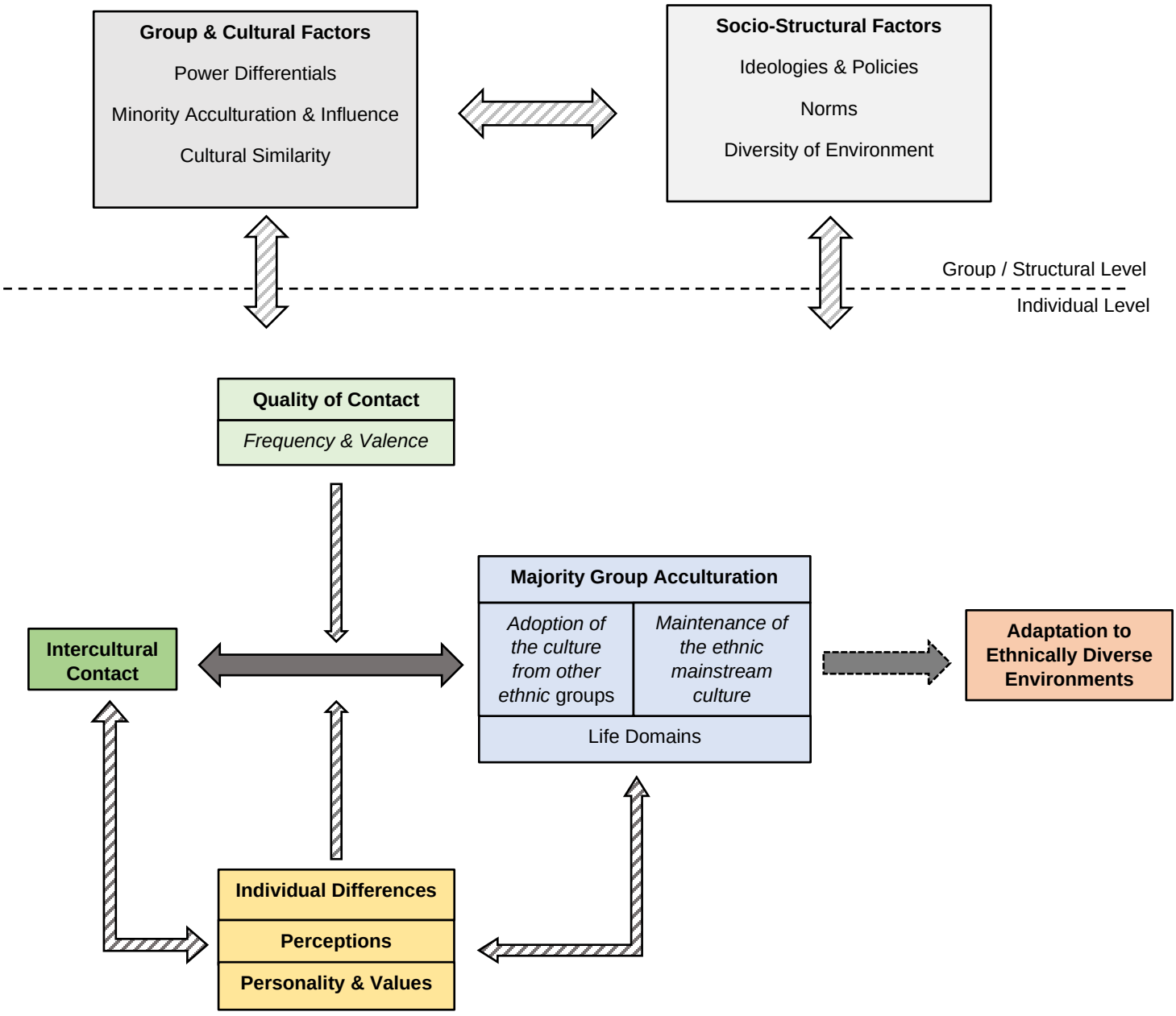
Note. + indicates a positive significant relationship. – indicates a negative significant relationship. Ns indicates a non-significant relationship. NA = Relationship not available in the respective study.

Conceptual Model and Future Research Directions

Although the fourfold model of acculturation explains considerable variation in majority-group members' acculturation, the recurrent diffuse cluster suggests that further refinement is needed for conceptualizing majority-group acculturation. Accordingly, we present a model of majority-group acculturation in Figure 2. Grounded in processes identified in the existing literature, the model includes individual-level factors and interpersonal experiences and their relationship to adaptation to culturally diverse environments. The model also suggests concrete ways to extend the literature on this topic in a theory-based way by taking a multi-level perspective that further considers group/cultural characteristics and socio-structural influences. Our model assumes that each majority group's acculturation needs to be understood within its unique context (the specificity principle of acculturation; Bornstein, 2017) but that groups and contexts also share commonalities. As such, some similar processes are expected to influence and respond to majority-group members' acculturation across contexts, whereas others may be context-dependent. The factors identified at each level are intended as illustrative elements, not as an exhaustive list.

Figure 2

Conceptual model of majority-group members' acculturation. At the individual-level, acculturation starts with the process of intercultural contact between majority-group members and those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members within a shared society. Depending on how majority-group members perceive this contact, their individual differences (e.g., values, traits), and their intergroup attitudes, this contact influences the extent to which they adopt the culture of those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members and the degree to which they maintain their majority-group culture. How they acculturate may further influence how they feel (i.e., psychological adaptation) and how efficiently they navigate their cultural life surroundings (i.e., sociocultural adaptation). Importantly, these individual processes are likely to interact further with variables at the group/cultural and socio-structural level.


Group & Cultural Factors
Power Differentials
Minority Acculturation & Influence
Cultural Similarity
Socio-Structural Factors
Ideologies & Policies
Norms
Diversity of Environment
Group / Structural Level
Individual Level
Quality of Contact
Frequency & Valence
Intercultural Contact
Majority Group Acculturation
Adoption of the culture from other ethnic groups
Maintenance of the ethnic mainstream culture
Life Domains
Adaptation to Ethnically Diverse Environments
Individual Differences
Perceptions
Personality & Values

Individual Level

At the core of the model is majority-group members' individual-level acculturation, that is, the degree to which they (a) adopt the culture of those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members and (b) the degree to which they maintain their majority-group culture (see Figure 2). Guided by seminal acculturation research (Schwartz et al., 2010), this process can vary by life domains.

Also at the individual level of our model (see Figure 2) are individual differences (e.g., open-mindedness) and intergroup perceptions (e.g., viewing diversity as a benefit rather than a threat, perceiving multicultural norms; Watters et al., 2020). These factors can directly or indirectly (e.g., by facilitating more and higher quality intergroup contact; Jackson & Poulsen, 2005) influence majority-group acculturation (e.g., leading to more adoption of another culture and less own culture maintenance) and, in turn, be shaped by this acculturation. Certain individual differences can also make majority-group members' adoption of other cultures less likely: Prejudiced majority-group members may experience cultural exchanges as superficial and non-intimate (Boin et al., 2021), thereby reducing the impact of contact on acculturation.

The model also highlights reciprocal, potentially cyclical relationships at the individual level. For example, positive intergroup attitudes may not only lead to greater majority-group acculturation, but also greater acculturation may in turn lead to developing more positive perceptions and attitudes as well as adoption of values that promote more and higher quality contact, which can ultimately promote further acculturation.

At the individual level, majority-group members' acculturation may influence their psychological adaptation (e.g., well-being), sociocultural adaptation (e.g., competence in navigating culturally-diverse contexts), and cognitive adaptation (e.g., creativity, flexible

thinking). Importantly, both adoption of minority-group culture and maintenance of the majority culture may be adaptive depending on the respective context. For instance, while adoption of minority perspectives may facilitate communication with ethnic out-group members, maintaining one's heritage culture may offer benefits in interactions with other majority-group members. However, given new meta-analytic insights into the role of acculturation for adaptation (Bierwiaczonek & Kunst, 2021) and inconsistent findings in research on majority-group acculturation, we have represented the connection between acculturation and adaptation with dashed lines. To the best of our knowledge, only one study found, in one of its samples, that adopting elements from other cultures correlated with higher life satisfaction and less acculturative stress among majority-group members (Lefringhausen & Marshall, 2016). By contrast, several studies have shown that maintaining their majority culture was positively linked to life satisfaction and self-esteem (Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Lefringhausen & Marshall, 2016). These latter findings are consistent with general theorizing in acculturation and ethnic identity research, suggesting that a stable and secure attachment to one's own group will be related to more positive psychological adaptation (Phinney et al., 1997). Thus, the fact that threat was related to more cultural maintenance (see Table 1) suggests that majority-group members, just as minority-group members, may increase their engagement in their heritage culture to counter uncertainty (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Sociocultural adaptation can represents the acquisition of new cultural schemas that facilitate cultural "fluency" (Doucerain, 2019). As majority-group members adopt values and worldviews from minority-group members, they may experience more fluent interactions in culturally diverse environments. This change may involve processes at a very basic cognitive level, including situational perceptions and automatic affective responses. One moderating factor

may thus be majority-group members' adoption of new moral values that alter their perceptions of, and emotional reactions to, different situations.

Group/Cultural Level

Our model also considers processes at the group/cultural level (see Figure 2). Status differences between the majority and minority groups represent one such factor. Societies are universally structured by group hierarchy, with high-power groups having more access to resources and more control over low-power groups (Sidanius et al., 2016). Because people, particularly those who strongly endorse group hierarchies, tend to see group outcomes as zero-sum – a gain for another group is seen as a loss for one's own group – majority-group members may be resistant to adopt the culture of low-status minority groups (Guimond et al., 2013; Verkuyten, 2006).

However, when majority-group members perceive that the inclusion of other groups' values, traditions, ideas, or skills make the collective group stronger, they may be more willing to adopt various aspects that "newcomers" bring with them (Rink & Ellemers, 2008). This may especially be the case when majority-group members perceive those who identify as immigrants or minority-group members as people who share a common in-group identity (e.g., an inclusive national identity; Gaertner et al., 2016; Rink & Ellemers, 2008).

Importantly, members of a high-power majority group may indeed adopt aspects of the cultures of those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members but in a superficial way that reflects exertion of majority-group dominance in the form of cultural appropriation (Rogers, 2006) rather than "true" acculturation (i.e., a deeper, constructive engagement with new cultural content which may ultimately be adopted permanently). While majority-group members may not acknowledge the role of dominance in this process, minority-group members often perceive

cultural appropriation as a threat to their group's distinctiveness, which adversely affects intergroup relations (Mosley & Biernat, 2020). Hence, the impact of majority-group members' acculturation critically depends on its underlying motivations.

Motivations for maintaining distinctiveness among groups appear to be particularly strong in contexts in which the social group in power represents a numerical minority in the society – historically in South African Apartheid and currently in countries such as the United Arab Emirates. In these contexts, high-power numerical-minority groups can be expected to show little voluntary adoption of the low-power numerical-majority group's culture (Berry, 2017). In other words, in contexts in which power and numerical size are dissociated, motivations to maintain, reinforce, or enhance power differentials play a particularly strong role, limiting the acculturation of those who are identified as members of the high-power, yet, numerical minority group.

Socio-Structural Level

Societal ideologies, policies and norms are likely to play an important role in majority-group acculturation. Societies that favor assimilation as an acculturation strategy, either by norms or formal policy (Sam & Berry, 2016), are unlikely to encourage majority-group acculturation because people identifying as immigrants or minority-group members are expected to adopt the standards of the majority-group culture, not vice versa. By contrast, multicultural societies that codify the accommodation of elements of different cultures in formal policy, such as in multilingual education, holiday celebration, or other expressions of cultural traditions, are more likely to exhibit mutual acculturation and engage more actively and constructively with other cultures (Sam & Berry, 2016).

Future Directions: Cross-Level Research

Our model has the potential of suggesting cross-level research directions. Considering majority-group acculturation as involving both individual-level and group/cultural-level processes helps illuminate how people identifying as immigrants or minority-group members can actively influence the culture of majority-group members during intercultural exchanges. Applying the minority influence framework (Harkins et al., 2017) to acculturation offers insights into how minority members can actively facilitate majority-group acculturation and suggests group/cultural-level factors (e.g., relative group size) that might moderate this effect.

Appreciating the potentially reciprocal group influences in the dynamics of acculturation also highlights the importance of the alignment between the preferred acculturation strategies of minority groups and the majority group (Bourhis et al., 1997), as well as of studying the *mutual* changes that may result (Berry, 2017; Horenczyk et al., 2013). For example, when the shared preference is integration, minority and majority groups may reciprocally adopt cultural elements from each other, which may ultimately lead to a new blended culture (Ward et al., 2018). The diffuse acculturation strategy repeatedly observed in previous work (see Figure 1) may reflect an orientation toward such a culture shift. Future qualitative and mixed-methods investigations may offer valuable insights into the everyday and long-term dynamics of majority-group members' acculturation. For instance, it is possible that majority-group members may have clearer acculturation preferences in some domains (e.g., socialization, friendships) than others (e.g., traditions, values). Moreover, likely, the diffuse cluster does not reflect just one but rather several cultural styles that a detailed focus on group/culture and structural processes may help distinguish.

Cultural similarity, located in the group/cultural level of our model, may also systematically influence majority-group acculturation at the individual level (Schwartz et al., 2010). Similarity between majority and minority cultures may increase the likelihood that different cultures evolve to become blended cultures, which involves significant majority-group cultural change. Conversely, dissimilarity between the cultures increases the probability that members of both minority and majority groups will perceive that the culture of the out-group threatens their own cultural values, symbols, and identities (Stephan et al., 2016). As such, majority-group members may selectively choose to adopt the culture from relatively similar immigrant or minority-groups at a higher rate.

Individual-level processes can also operate in combination with socio-structural level factors, such as the diversity of the environment. For majority-group members, adopting the ways (or cultural schemas) of other cultures may lead to more smooth and effective intercultural encounters, thereby reducing acculturative stress (Doucerain, 2019). However, this effect may occur primarily for majority-group members in socially diverse contexts, where being able to interact efficiently with members from other cultural groups is vital, and not in homogeneous majority-group environments. Moreover, as with the study of minority-group acculturation, the study of majority-group acculturation has thus far been primarily concerned with individual-level psychological changes. However, it is possible that, while both individual- and group-level changes are involved, immigrant and minority-group acculturation and majority-group acculturation may occur primarily at different levels. For members of immigrant or minority groups, as suggested by current findings, change may occur largely at an individual, psychological level. By contrast, majority-group acculturation may occur mainly at the group or

societal level as the content of mainstream culture is modified by the incorporation of new cultural elements.

Conclusion

As societies rapidly become more diverse, they often become more vulnerable to a range of intergroup tensions. Mutual acculturation – changes in the majority group as well as among immigrant and minority groups – may not only help achieve greater intergroup harmony but also create more cooperative, productive, and healthy relations between individuals and groups. Greater attention to the study of the dynamics and consequences of majority-group acculturation is timely and conceptually potentially transformative as it defines majority-group members as recipients and those identifying as immigrants or minority-group members as agents of social change in a globalized world.

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Recommended reading

1. A recent review of the field of majority-group acculturation and its relation to other frameworks:

   Lefringhausen, K., Marshall, T. C., Ferenczi, N., & Kunst, J. R. (2021). A new route towards more harmonious intergroup relationships in England? Majority members' proximal-acculturation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *82*, 56-73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.03.006

2. Introduction of the concept of "interculturalism," which emphasizes identity flexibility and the formation of new identities, as alternative to multiculturalism.

   Verkuyten, M., Yogeeswaran, K., Mepham, K., Sprong, S. (2020). Interculturalism: A new diversity ideology with interrelated components of dialogue, unity, and identity flexibility. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *50*, 505– 519. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2628

3. A novel framework introducing "identity styles," such as "hybrid identities" among minority-group members that also may be of high relevance to majority-group members.

   Ward C., Ng Tseung-Wong C., Szabo A., Qumseya T., Bhowon U.. Hybrid and alternating identity styles as strategies for managing multicultural identities. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. 2018;49(9):1402-1439. doi:10.1177/0022022118782641