

TEMPORAL ACCULTURATION AND MENTAL HEALTH IN
MODERN IRELANDMALCOLM MacLACHLAN, CAROLINE SMYTH, FIONA BREEN &
TONYA MADDEN**ABSTRACT**

Background: Research on geographic acculturation has demonstrated an association between the sort of acculturation strategy adopted by migrants and their mental health status. However, there have been no studies of the relationship between temporal acculturation – attempts to adapt to change within the same society over time – and mental health.

Method: We explored the relevance of Berry's bidimensional framework of acculturation, to perceptions of social change within Ireland over the last 10 years, in a sample of 735 members of the general public.

Results: There was a significant relationship between temporal acculturation strategy and mental health. An acculturation strategy of assimilating into 'modern' Ireland was associated with significantly better mental health than an ambivalent acculturation strategy.

Conclusions: This is a first exploration of the relationship between temporal acculturation and mental health. While models of geographic acculturation are relevant to temporal acculturation, we have also identified a new category of acculturation strategy, ambivalence, as being associated with the poorest mental health outcomes.

Ireland in the last 10 years has witnessed the emergence of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' characterised by unprecedented levels of immigration, increasing secularisation, economic prosperity and a general liberalisation of social attitudes (Department of Justice, 2000; MacLachlan & O'Connell, 2000; O'Connell, 2001). As such, Ireland may be seen to offer a particularly good case for the study of the effects of rapid social change. Not only does this have acculturation implications for those people entering the nation but also for those within the nation, who already call it 'home'. While Berry's theory of acculturation (Berry, 1970) offers a robust and intuitively appealing framework for understanding the acculturation experience of the former group, those psychological pressures and general changes experienced by the latter group are, as yet, unaccounted for. In response to this, we introduce the concept of *temporal acculturation* – that is, culture change *within* a nation *over time*.

When Berry presented his model of acculturation (1970, 1997) he proposed that there existed four specific acculturation strategies (*separation, marginalisation, integration and assimilation*) determined by the extent to which people value their heritage culture relative

to the one they have migrated to. He then went on to assert that these could be 'ordered' in terms of the psychological health they implied for the individual (Berry & Kim, 1988) with this impact extending across each of physiological, psychological and social aspects of health and well-being. Add to this Ward *et al.*'s (2001) findings on *culture shock* (which shares much with the earlier concept of *acculturative stress*) and a general picture of the impact of culture change on the individual begins to emerge.

Our argument is that there is no reason to suspect that the same key principles cannot be applied to temporal acculturation; that the psychological impact of culture change may not be any less for those who are native to the culture undergoing change. People who have for years existed in one culture into which they have been socialised and from which they derive (to some extent at least) their sense of self (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Liebkind, 1996; Schnittker, 2002) and who are then faced with a newly emerging culture to which they must adapt, must surely undergo some form of acculturative experience. *This* is what we term temporal acculturation.

Temporal factors are an implicit part of the aforementioned *culture shock* phenomenon where the individual may experience elation at first, upon moving to the new culture, followed by a difficult period (often associated with significant mental distress) and then a longer-term and more positive adaptation to the new environment (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ward *et al.*, 2001).

While basing our approach on Berry's acculturation framework, we wanted to take account of two problematic aspects of this approach. First, it remains unclear whether a unidimensional or bidimensional approach to acculturation is more appropriate (Dion & Dion, 1996; Ryder *et al.*, 2000; Flannery *et al.*, 2001). Is it that a migrant 'gives up' their home or native culture in favour of the host culture (unidimensional), or is it that a relationship with both cultures continues (bidimensional), and what significance might this distinction have for mental health? We therefore sought to measure acculturation in a manner that did not preclude one model or the other.

The second issue we wished to take account of was that research on acculturation, particularly within Berry's bidimensional framework, has classified people into one of four acculturation strategies depending on the degree to which they identify with 'heritage' and 'host' culture. In effect two dichotomised variables are combined into a 2×2 matrix. In measuring this, people are assigned an acculturation strategy with only two options – they either do or do not wish to retain identity with heritage and host cultures. However, it may be that many individuals feel somewhat ambivalent about one or both cultures. If this is the case then perhaps ambivalence itself is a mode of acculturation that should be acknowledged, and its mental health consequences explored.

In the questions we use, reference is made to 'old' and 'new' Ireland. The details of what constitutes each are left to individual interpretation as it is the individual's experience that interests us – the personal experience of culture and its change. To develop a question that referred to each of social, economic, familial, political, artistic, etc. changes would not only have been unduly cumbersome but it would have restricted the range of experience the individual could include in considering their answer and, given that the very concept is in its infancy to reduce and restrict at this stage was deemed unwise. Further to this, we wanted to investigate the extent to which Inglehart and Baker's (2000) proposal of the existence of a 'culture imprint' (in short, that even amid radical culture change there remains a

significant persistence of traditional values and an acknowledgement of what the old culture was) applied to the Irish situation.

PARTICIPANTS

Following ethical approval, participants came from a convenience sample of the general public consisting of 344 males and 391 females ($N = 735$) with age ranging from 16 years to 87 years (Mean = 34.24 years, SD = 16.28 years). Data were collected on board three trains' outgoing and return journeys (Dublin to Galway, Dublin to Cork and Dublin to Limerick) on Monday 27th November 2000. Participants were handed an envelope invited to complete the 'brief enclosed questionnaire' and told that the researcher would return to collect the envelope in 20 minutes. Two hundred and fifty envelopes were handed out on each trains' outgoing journey. Those that were not completed were then handed out on the return journey.

MEASURES

The questionnaire was comprised of three sections.

The first section concerned demographics. The second, consisted of three questions with responses measured along a five-point Likert-type scale ('strongly agree', 'agree', 'unsure', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree') as follows:

Q1: 'I think that there has been a big change in Irish culture during the last 10 years.'

Q2: 'I want to hold on to the "old" Ireland.'

Q3: 'I want to be a part of the "new" Ireland.'

The area of acculturation lacks standardised measures that are universally used with any regularity, however, a vast variety of acculturation scales and measures are available. Single-item measures, both in this and other areas of psychology, have been used and shown to perform as well as multiple-item comparison scales (Gardner *et al.*, 1998). Specifically, within the field of cultural psychology, Epstein *et al.* (1996) recommend the use of single-item measures, with one clear advantage being their ease and speed of administration, which was of particular importance in the context of this research.

The third section was the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg, 1992), a well validated measure of psychological distress.

In the envelope there was also a loose page with telephone numbers of relevant mental health helplines.

RESULTS

In total 88% (643) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that there had been a 'big change in Irish culture during the past 10 years'. Less perceived change in Irish culture was

significantly associated with higher GHQ-12 scores ($F = 17.31, p < .001$) indicating poorer mental health.

There was a modest correlation coefficient between ratings on the extent to which participants wished to identify with 'old' or 'new' Ireland ($r = .123, p < .01$) which, while statistically significant, represented only a very small effect size, accounting for less than 2% of the variance between them. This implies that changes in the extent to which people wish to identify with 'old' and 'new' Ireland are not mirror images of each other, and therefore that cultural change within this sample cannot easily be accounted for by a unidimensional model.

Next we classified scores on each of the 'old' and 'new' Ireland scales into 'agrees', 'unsures' and 'disagrees'. In accordance with Berry, we identified integration (agree, agree, $n = 226$), marginalisation (disagree, disagree, $n = 9$), assimilation and separation (agree, disagree, $n = 150$ and disagree, agree, $n = 49$) on our 'old' and 'new' Ireland scales. However, in addition, we classified those who gave one or more 'unsure' response, as using an 'ambivalent' acculturation strategy ($n = 298$).

We then undertook a further ANOVA to explore whether the dependent variable GHQ score was influenced by the independent variable of acculturation strategy.

There was a significant relationship between acculturation strategy chosen and GHQ score ($F = 2.91, p < .021$). Post hoc analysis identified this effect as arising from the difference in those adopting an assimilated acculturation strategy (mean GHQ score = 2.11, $SD = 2.89$) and those adopting an ambivalent acculturation strategy (mean GHQ score = 2.94, $SD = 3.02$). Thus it was the experience of cultural ambivalence that was most strongly associated with poor mental health while an assimilationist strategy was most strongly associated with good mental health.

Finally, we undertook an ANCOVA to establish whether the relationship between acculturation strategy and mental health was mediated by perceptions of the extent of change in Irish culture. The covariate of perception of extent of change was strongly significant ($F = 32.37, p < .001$) while the main effect of acculturation strategy, although slightly weakened, remained significant ($F = 2.677, p < .031$).

No significant gender differences were found at any stage of the analysis.

DISCUSSION

The vast majority of participants felt that there had been a significant change in Irish society over the last 10 years, thus indicating the appropriateness of our sample for an exploration of temporal acculturation. Furthermore, the small correlation between the desire for 'old' and 'new' Ireland, suggests that participants did not simply want to give up the old and replace it with the new. These findings would therefore give some support to Inglehart and Baker (2000), whose World Values Survey (inclusive of some 65 societies), found that even in the context of radical cultural change there remains a significant persistence of traditional values: a 'cultural imprint' that continues to exist despite such change.

We found that poorer mental health was associated with less perceived change in Irish culture. This is quite an unexpected result since we would not expect this group to experience the stress of temporal acculturation. Such a result is difficult to account for and we can only

speculate in order to try and explain it. For instance, in the context of so many social and economic indices so clearly demonstrating dramatic change in Ireland (O'Connell, 2001), it may be that those who were either unsure ($n = 4.2\%$), who disagreed ($n = 5\%$) or strongly disagreed ($n = 2.9\%$) that Ireland had changed, in some way object to the change and perhaps, enter into denial over it. On the other hand, it may be that they are drawing a distinction between a demonstrative change in Ireland socially and economically and a cultural change per se. This unexpected finding clearly calls for additional research in the area supported by qualitative measures to elucidate further the individual meaning and experience of 'culture'.

Independent of the above-mentioned effect we also found that acculturative strategy was significantly associated with mental health. Interestingly, it was the assimilationist strategy of rejecting the old Ireland and identifying with the new Ireland that was most strongly associated with good mental health. This would suggest that while cultural change in this sample was generally a bidimensional process as noted earlier, those who adopted a unidimensional strategy towards it, were in the best mental health.

Only the ambivalent acculturation strategy was associated with significantly poorer mental health than the assimilationist strategy. Thus it may be better to have some sort of acculturation strategy, even if one is not aware of it, than to be unsure of one's attitudes towards temporal change. It may be argued that our results contrast with the notion of hybridisation (or 'creolisation'). However, these concepts refer to combining two aspects of heritage in an advantageous manner, while our own results are concerned with combining aspects of heritage with modernity, each of which are part of the individual's own lived experience of their world. Thus the notion of hybridisation (or 'creolisation') is not directly related to our own notion of an ambivalent acculturation strategy.

We would like to acknowledge that our own convenience sample lacked the stratification of a more sophisticated approach, yet it did have participants drawn from 29 of the 32 counties in the island of Ireland, with a broad age range and a relatively balanced gender ratio. We also acknowledge that our particular measure of acculturation strategy is but one way of measuring this complex construct and probably reflects a relatively global interpretation of our questions. Other interpretations may produce different results.

We believe that temporal acculturation, in its own right, is an important area for research. It may also be the case that it is significant in that it challenges some of the assumptions we have previously made with regard to changing societies and their inhabitants. Specifically a temporal acculturation paradigm may address questions such as '*Who* is likely to experience culture change?', '*When* is it likely to take place?' and '*How* is culture change responded to in terms of mental health and psychological functioning?' These issues suggest possibilities for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to acknowledge a National Children's Strategy Doctoral Fellowship, which contributed to funding this research.

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