

# From “Cultural Shock” to “ABC Framework”: Development of Intercultural Contact Theory

Yun Yue<sup>1</sup>, Quynh Le<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*University of Tasmania*

## ABSTRACT

With the accelerating pace of globalization and unprecedentedly increase of population mobility, intercultural contact has been penetrated into every field of the world in an interwoven and interdependent form. The complex interdependency and interconnectivity require a deeper understanding of the varieties and characteristics of intercultural contacts. Since Oberg proposed the concept “cultural shock” in 1960, the research on intercultural contacts has been developed for more than half a century, and a relatively complete theoretical framework has been established. The paper, through a comprehensive review of the literature, gives an explicit timeline of the research development. Barry’s acculturation and its varieties and Affect-Behavior-Cognition (ABC) theories are clearly demonstrated in the paper.

**Keywords:** intercultural contact, cultural shock, acculturation, cultural learning, coping and stress, identity

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, intercultural contact is not a new concept. It commonly occurs when people from one tribe or ethnic group encountered another one from another tribe or ethnic group and discover that they are different. These differences would be misinterpreted or misunderstood and elicit the two groups of people’s negative feedback or responses to each other. However, under the circumstance of considering political alliance, business cooperation, and other types of cross-cultural collaboration, people have to learn how to understand and even accommodate the opposite culture. Hence, intercultural contact related research, including people’s behavioral and psychological reaction to the unfamiliar culture and its influential factors at societal and individual levels have drawn great interest of the scholars from the various disciplines, including culture studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, etc. The paper reviews literature and give an explicitly timeline of the development of intercultural contact research from 1960. It is found that the three concepts or theoretical frameworks - cultural shock, acculturation theory, and ABC

theoretical framework - are salient in the literature and have substantially influential effects on the intercultural contact research.

## **THE CONCEPT OF “CULTURE SHOCK”**

The term “culture shock” was first proposed by Oberg in a short descriptive article. Oberg argued that “culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (1960, p. 142). According to Oberg, culture shock is considered as experienced by people who suddenly transferred abroad. This has its own symptoms, cause and cure like most diseases. Oberg’s theory was supported by a few scholars. For example, Kenneth (1971) noted that culture shock is a common phenomenon for the sojourners, and there is a decrease in socio-personal adjustment with behavioural disorders or neurotic symptoms which occur when a person is undergoing a stressful situation. Adler also agreed that “culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one’s own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences” (1975, p. 13). Furthermore, Taft (1977) proposed six aspects of culture shock, which seem to be the best consensus statement.

1. Strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations;
2. A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions;
3. Being rejected by and/or rejecting members of the new culture;
4. Confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity;
5. Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences; and
6. Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment .

Oberg (1960) further pointed out that there are four discerning stages in the process where a sojourner transits from culture shock to satisfactory adjustment. The first stage is the honeymoon stage, which might last from a few days to weeks even and a few months depending on the circumstances of the individuals. In this stage, the sojourner usually is fascinated by the new environment around him or her. But if the foreign visitor remains abroad, he or she will have to face and overcome real problems in life, such as language, accommodation, transportation, shopping, etc. At this point, the second stage begins. The sojourner could feel frustrated, anxious and angry. The third stage is recovery, which is a process of crisis resolution and culture learning, and then the sojourner steps into the last stage of complete full recovery, reflecting enjoyment of and adaptation to the new environment. Other scholars also look at the entire process in similar ways as Oberg’s, although different terms are adopted. For example, Richardson (1974) named the four stages as elation, depression, recovery and acculturation. Adler (1975) divided the process into five stages: contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and independence.

## THE ACCULTURATION THEORY

Since the introduction of the term culture shock, a great number of studies internationally have emerged. A salient concept of acculturative stress proposed by Berry (1970) was introduced as an alternative to the term culture shock. Culture shock was re-defined by Zhang and Berry (Zheng & Berry, 1991) as

A form of stress in which the stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation, there is often a particular set of stress behaviours, which occur during acculturation, such as lowered mental health status (specially anxiety and depression), feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptom level, and identity confusion.

Berry (1997, 2006) gave two reasons for replacing culture shock with acculturative stress. First, the notion of shock tends to be negative, while stress may have both positive and negative aspects. Thus, the term stress better matches the concept of acculturation as cultural adjustment is a process comprising both positive and negative experiences. Furthermore, there is no psychological or cultural theory behind the term shock, while stress has a developed theoretical frame. Secondly, as cultural adaptation is a process of interactions between two cultures, acculturation is a more appropriate term, while culture is a concept which has a mono context.

In fact, the item acculturative stress was developed based on the concept of acculturation, which has been a subject of study for many years. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) defined acculturation as,

Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.

This definition frames acculturation as a group-level phenomenon. However, other studies (Berry, 1970; Furnham & Bochner, 1986) argued that acculturation should be discussed at an individual level because acculturation is a change in the psychology of the individual. They claimed that even if general changes may be profound in the group, the individuals' changes might vary greatly in degree as they participate in these collective changes. Based on this perspective, Arends-Toth and Vijver offered another definition of acculturation: "changes that an individual experiences as a result of contact with one or more other cultures and of the participation in the ensuing process of change that one's cultural or ethnic group is undergoing" (2006, p. 34).

Dimensions or categories of acculturation have been further examined by more and more scholars in intercultural studies. Two models have emerged in the many studies on acculturation. One is the bi-dimensional model (Ryder, Alden, & Paulbus, 2000; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006; Tadorom & Tetlock, 2006), which claims that acculturation is presented in a form of the dimensional model, which is an interlaced process of the receiving-culture acquisition and a heritage-culture retention. Thus, those who have been experiencing cultural transition are susceptible to take various pressures from either the receiving cultural context or the heritage cultural community, or both.

Based on the bi-dimensional model, another well-known model of acculturation developed is Berry's acculturation strategies. There are two underlying questions for this conceptual framework: "Is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics? Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with the larger society?" (Berry, 1997, p. 10).

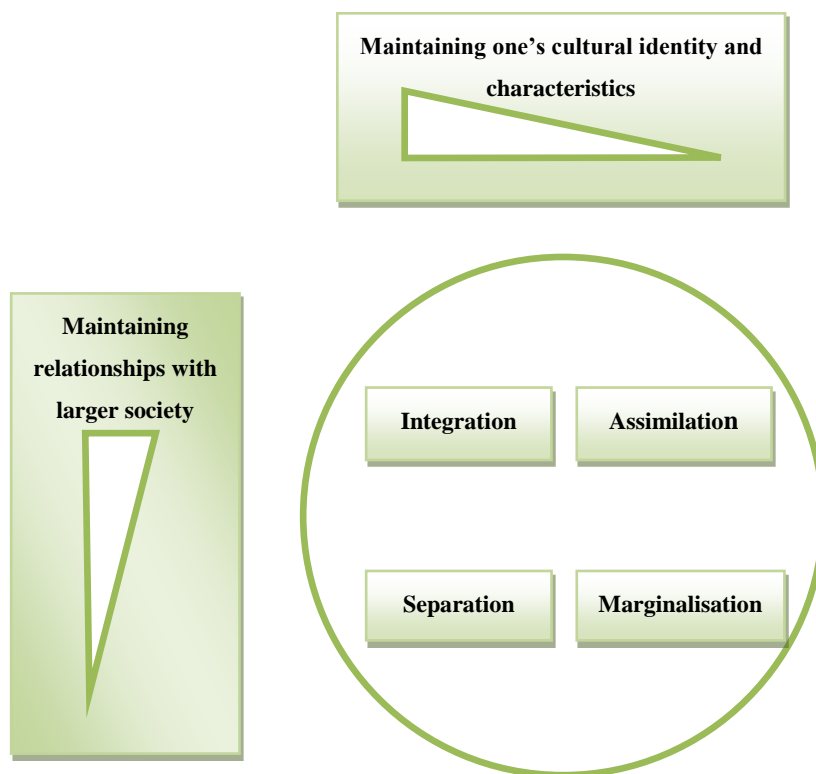


Figure 1. Berry's acculturative strategies: Integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation (Berry, 1997)

The above figure is a representation of Berry's acculturative strategies. Four kinds of acculturative strategies are defined according to how a non-dominant group or an individual responds to the two underlying questions. When there is an interest in both maintaining their own cultural identity and having interactions with the host society, integration is the strategy to be adopted. However, when the non-dominant group or individual is inclined to build intensive and extensive interaction with the local society without any interests in maintaining their own cultural heritage, assimilation is the strategy. In contrast, if the group or the individual does not want to have any interaction with the local society but is highly interested in maintaining their original culture, separation is defined. Lastly, when there is no possibility or interest in maintaining the original culture maintenance or in building a relationship with the local community, marginalisation is the defined strategy.

Within Berry's acculturative strategies, integration represents a bi-dimensional model. It can be regarded as an ideal outcome of acculturation. Integration can be successfully pursued by both the non-dominant groups which have keen interests in interacting with the larger society and the dominant society which is open and inclusive to embrace multicultural diversity and meet the needs of all ethnic groups living together.

Although the acculturation theory has inspired a large number of studies on intercultural contacts, there are two main questions about the theory. First, the four acculturative strategies are too generalised in explaining a diverse range of intercultural contact strategies (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). Second, the validity of marginalisation has been questioned as it is hard to

understand how a non-dominant group's cultural identity develops without interacting with either their own cultural heritage or the receiving culture (Rudmin, 2003).

## **THE AFFECT-BEHAVIOUR-COGNITION (ABC) FRAMEWORK**

The culture shock theory has led to a great deal of academic research internationally. Barry's acculturation theory is one of the prominent theoretical frameworks which have been reviewed in the last section. This section presents another important theoretical framework:

Affect-Behaviour-Cognition (ABC). The theoretical framework has been developed on the basis of Berry's acculturation theory and is more comprehensive as it embraces three salient concepts: cultural learning, stress and coping, and social identification and the three concepts focus respectively on behaviour, affect and cognition. The theoretical framework collaboratively provides a more comprehensive insight into people's cultural adaptation to a new environment.

### **Culture learning (behaviour)**

The "culture learning" concept originated from social psychology, which emphasises the behavioural aspect of intercultural contact and regards social interaction as a mutually organised and skilled behavioural performance. It also argues that the conflicts or stress caused by intercultural contact are largely due to the sojourner lacking the social skills of the new society (Argyle, 1969). Cultural learning was strongly advocated by Furnham and Bochner's (1986) and it has become a theoretic basis for cultural training models.

Having general knowledge about the host culture and being competent in intercultural communication are two important aspects of culture learning. Acquiring cultural knowledge is "the process of seeking and obtaining a sound educational foundation about diverse cultural and ethnic groups" (Campinha-Bacote, 2002, p. 182). Having intercultural communication competence requires the sojourner to have knowledge of both his/her own national and host-national communication patterns, rules and conventions that regulate interpersonal communication. It also includes how people send and receive information, express their emotion, and influence each other by verbal and non-verbal communication (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). The culture learning theory involves and demands a great deal of cultural knowledge and social skills of the receiving society which are acquired in the new sociocultural context. Therefore, it leads to practical guidelines for preparation, orientation and behavioural social skills training (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008).

### **Stress and coping (affect)**

While "culture learning" focuses on the behavioural component of intercultural contact, the "stress and coping" emphasises the affective aspect which examines the sojourners' psychological wellbeing and satisfaction in the process of intercultural transition.

Theoretically originated from Holmes and Rahe's (1967) life events concept and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress, appraisal and coping theory, the stress and coping concept holds a view that stress is inherently caused by life changes in the process of cross-cultural transitions and thus a sojourner needs to select or develop effective strategies and tactics to cope with the stress (Zhou et al., 2008). Both stress and coping strategies correlate with the characteristics of the situation and

the characteristics of the individual, and in turn, affect the outcome of adjustment (Berry, 1997). At societal level, variables such as the political context, economic situation, attitudes towards ethnic out-groups and social support in both the society of origin and the society of settlement all affect the psychological adjustment of the non-dominants in the host country. At individual level, the individual's demographics, expectations, cultural distance, personality, length of stay, and acculturation strategies are regarded as influential factors which are related to their psychological wellbeing in the process of transition. The concept of "stress and coping" can be implicated in training people to develop stress-management skills (Ward et al., 2001).

### **Social identification (cognition)**

The "social identification" concept is regarded as the cognitive aspect of intercultural contact. The concept is originally based on theories of social cognition and social identity (Deaux, 1996) which focuses on examining the ways in which people ethnically and culturally identify themselves, including how they perceive themselves and others as well as how they establish relations with their own ethnic groups (in-groups) and other ethnic groups (out-groups). Intercultural contact and/or cultural transition are highly likely to affect the sojourner's perception of his/her cultural identity and relations with the in-groups and out-groups. Two major conceptual approaches have been used to examine issues associated with social identification: acculturation and identity, and the social identity theory.

#### **Acculturation and identity**

The first conceptual approach is "acculturation and identity". In relation to Berry's acculturation theory, the approach mainly examines the sojourners' identity changes in the process of intercultural contact. Those who are from countries with a relatively homogeneous culture or a cultural distance far away from the host country would encounter more challenges in processing and categorising their identity.

Berry's four acculturation strategies form a theoretical base for categorising the various identification processes encountered by the sojourners. Assimilation describes a state that a sojourner identifies entirely with the host culture and at the same time completely gives up his/her own original identity. Contrary to assimilation, separation refers to a situation in which a sojourner treasures highly his/her own heritage culture and does not identify with the host culture. Integration implies that an individual considers both the home and host cultures equally important in his identification. Marginalisation means that the individual sees himself/herself low in both home and host culture identification. Furthermore, identity correlates with a diversity of variables, including individual characteristics (gender, age and education); home society characteristics (migration motivation and cultural similarity); and host society's characteristics (prejudice and discrimination; monoculturalism or multiculturalism).

#### **Social identity theory**

The "social identity theory" (Tajfel, 1981) is another conceptual approach which examines how a group affects an individual's identity. It has been one of the most frequently referenced conceptual approaches for exploring identity and intergroup relations in sojourners. What it concerns is the relationship between (1) self-esteem and (2) social categorisation and social comparison. Social

identification relies on how social categorisation and social comparison affect social identification. Favourable comparisons are positively correlated with self-esteem. A relationship between cultural identity and self-esteem only occurs when an individual consciously perceives his/her own culture as a salient feature of his/her identity. Also, intergroup bias is an important issue of social identification (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Ward et al., 2001). A few studies (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) have found that in-group favouritism and out-group derogation are common, and the latter is more likely to occur when in-group identity is threatened. Furthermore, the approach explores the minorities' responses to discriminations caused by the majorities' negative social comparison. The typical responses to discrimination are individual mobility, social creativity and social competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In summary, the Affect-Behaviour-Cognition theoretical framework sheds light on three important aspects of intercultural contact which form a comprehensive conceptual framework of cultural adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Since Oberg proposed an innovative concept "cultural shock" in 1960, intercultural contact has been studied for more than 50 years. Till now, a relatively completed theoretical framework has been established. Via a comprehensive literature review, the paper emphasizes the three salient concepts or theories and draws a clear timeline of intercultural contact research. The concept of "cultural shock" is considered as a milestone in the area. Oberg described the special occupational disease with a well-known four-stage definition laying a solid foundation to the following research. In 1970s-1980s, Berry introduced the concept of "acculturation" and replaced "cultural shock" with a new definition of "acculturative stress". Four acculturative strategies clearly demonstrate the non-dominants' perception to the host culture and their own identity. The Affect-Behaviour-Cognition (ABC) framework is, in fact, an abstract of a great number of studies in the area of intercultural contacts after Berry's acculturation theory. The three components: culture learning, stress and coping, and social identification combined together to draw a complete picture of intercultural contact.

## REFERENCE

- Adler, P. S. (1975). The transitional experience : an alternative view of culture shock. *J Humanist Psychol*, 15, 13-23.
- Arends-Toth, J., & Vijver, J. R. (2006). Issues in the conceptualization and assessment of acculturation. In H. B. Mara & R. C. Linda (Eds.), *Acculturation and Parent-Child Relationships: Measurement and Development* (pp. 33-63). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers.
- Argyle, M. (1969). *Social interaction*. London: Methuen.
- Benet-Martinez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2005). Bicultural identity integration (BII): Components and psychosocial antecedents. *Journal of personality* 73, 1015-1050.
- Berry, J. W. (1970). Marginality, stress and ethnic identification in an acculturated aboriginal community. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, 1, 239-252.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation. *Applied Psychology* 46(5-34).

- Berry, J. W. (2006). Acculturative stress. In P. Wong & L. Wong (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural perspectives on stress and coping* (pp. 287-298). New York: Springer.
- Branscombe, N. R., & Wann, D. L. (1994). Collective self-esteem consequences of outgroup derogation when a valued social identity is on trial. *European journal of social psychology*, 24, 641-657.
- Campinha-Bacote, J. (2002). The process of cultural competence in the delivery of healthcare services: A model of care. *Journal of transcultural nursing*, 13(3), 181-184.
- Deaux, K. (1996). Social identification. In E. T. H. A. W. Kruglanski (Ed.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 777-798). New York: Guilford Press.
- Furnham, A., & Bochner, S. (1986). *Culture shock: psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, R. H. (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of psychosomatic research* 11, 213-218.
- Kenneth, H. D. (1971). Culture Shock and Development of Self-Awareness. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 4(1), 44-48.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7, 177-182.
- Redfield, R., Linton, R., & Herskovits, M. (1936). Memorandum on the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 38, 149-152.
- Richardson, A. (1974). *British immigrants and Australia: A psycho-social inquiry*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.
- Rudmin, F. W. (2003). Critical history of the acculturation psychology of assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. *Review of general psychology*, 7, 3-37.
- Ryder, A. G., Alden, L. E., & Paulbus, D. L. (2000). Is acculturation unidimensional or bidimensional? A head-to-head comparison in the prediction of personality, self-identity, and adjustment. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 79, 49-65.
- Schwartz, S. J., Montgomery, M. J., & Briones, E. (2006). The role of identity in acculturation among immigrant people: Theoretical propositions, empirical question, and applied recommendation. *Human development*, 49, 345-353.
- Tadomor, C. T., & Tetlock, P. E. (2006). Biculturation: A model of second-culture exposure on acculturation and integrative complexity. *Journal of cross-cultural psychology*, 37, 173-190.
- Taft, R. (1977). Coping with unfamiliar cultures. In N. Warren (Ed.), *Studies in cross-cultural psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 121-153). London: Academic Press.
- Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In W. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The Psychology of Culture shock* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Routledge.
- Zheng, X., & Berry, J. W. (1991). Psychological adaptation of Chinese sojourners in Canada. *International Journal of Psychology* 26(4), 451-470.





Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in higher education*, 33(1), 63-75.