Immigrant Sociocultural Adaptation, Identification, and Belonging

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Abstract

For over 150 years and motivated by mass rural-to-urban migrations precipitated by industrialization, social scientists have been studying the experiences of newcomers into established sociocultural contexts. They rightly hypothesized that people's identifications with their social groups, their feelings of belonging in particular, might be altered in societies where the scope and scale of social life rapidly expanded well beyond the face-to-face relations characteristic of smaller-scale societies. In addition, new forms of social solidarities and polarizations were swiftly emerging and taking hold. Early theorists faced the daunting task of not only chronicling these changes but also of theorizing in an age of newly forged and not yet sharpened social science analytical tools. Today the opposite is true; multiple models and almost innumerable publications compete to shed just a little more light on this complex social reality. Yet there is still room for innovation. Toward that goal I identify an approach meriting twenty-first century focus: bridging heretofore separate approaches to understanding the experiences of immigrant versus native newcomers, that is, acculturation versus enculturation. Scholars of immigration have studied acculturation intensively—the processes of adapting to new cultural contexts by people who come to these contexts firmly established culturally from their homelands. Meanwhile, the same scholars almost completely ignore enculturation—the processes involved in learning culture and belonging that occupy infants and young children. Drawing upon advances in understanding the brain-culture nexus, this essay argues that knowing more about enculturation can inform and improve understanding of acculturation. These concepts should form an analytical continuum examining how people come to identify and belong socially and how and why these shift in the course of life—particularly with migration.

Most social scientists now agree that humans create, impose, and also alter our own social order. Relatively, few human behavioral and thought patterns are genetically predetermined; people are less driven by instincts than by learned information. However, few scholars of migration study the advances in neuroscience and cognition that explain how infants can be born near patternless yet in a few short years become extraordinarily

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culturally competent. Might comprehending *en*culturation shed new light on *ac*culturation? There is robust scholarship to support this line of inquiry but, given space constraints here, I must limit developing this approach to two little-known and underutilized yet important analytical tools: Categorical Thinking and Boundaries/Boundary Work. These bridge enculturation to acculturation—and more.

CATEGORICAL THINKING

How do infants become socially integrated so quickly when they arrive into the world knowing almost nothing about the world beyond the womb? They enculturate largely through pattern recognition or what some refer to as *categorical thinking* (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Massey, 2007). Briefly, infants detect social patterns through observation, store them in memory and then parse new experiences against these stored models. Experience, then, builds the brain's neural circuits and these, in turn, while still flexible tend to drive all future performances and interpretations of experiences (Ramachandran, 2011; Seung, 2012). Categorical thinking is the foundation for cultural learning but what infants learn varies. For example, all societies make gender distinctions and thus babies learn gender matters, but there is huge variation not only in what different genders are expected to think and do, but also even in the number of genders socially recognized.

Through enculturation infants and toddlers first experience adaptation, identification and feelings of belonging. These become their baseline for comparison, lifelong reference points for recognizing difference. Enculturation occurs across enlarging social scales; infants interact most strongly with families but as they mature they engage broader social scales and complexities such as adapting to institutions and identifying with nations. No two people will grow up to be identical, yet each individual will integrate into and feel belonging among groups of varying sizes and affinities. Across all these social scales enculturation not only produces habituated behavior and thinking, but "it" also produces habituated feelings of normality and comfort (Mahler, 2013, see below).

Also noteworthy is that enculturation does not mean learning *one* culture because that unified, holistic notion is less fact than assumption (DiMaggio, 1997; Mahler, 2013). Rather, young children can be exposed to multiple languages and learn them perfectly; they can also learn multiple and even seemingly conflicting ways to do similar "things" such as customs for eating or dressing (e.g., learning to use chop sticks as well as fork/knife and "school clothes" vs pajamas). As children learn how to think and behave this knowledge is contextualized in ways that become normal and normative—even if these seem strange and/or contradictory to outsiders or scholars.

In sum, categorical thinking is how young children learn "their" culture. As they have repeated experiences, their brains turn them into stored neuronal circuits recording how their society's ways are patterned not random. So long as experiences conform to the old the brain operates on autopilot. This is largely the experience of the native-born. What happens, however, when newness is encountered? This is the lived daily reality for immigrants and to understand its significance I now turn to additional analytical tools—Boundaries and Boundary Work.

BOUNDARIES AND BOUNDARY WORK

As discussed above, culture involves imposing social categories onto the world. By necessity this also creates the need for conceptual distinctions or boundaries between social categories—something true both for domains of knowledge and for types within domains. Social scientists since Fredrik Barth have invoked the analytical usefulness of understanding boundaries (e.g., Alba, 2005; Lamont & Mólnar, 2002; Massey, 2007; Wimmer, 2008; Zolberg & Long, 1999) yet this approach has not become canonical. A main impediment is academic disciplines—a particular form of boundary. Where there are boundaries, there is boundary work (BW). In a valuable 1983 *American Sociological Review* piece, Thomas Gieryn explained how scientists in the nineteenth century erected a boundary between their approach (science) and all other ways to explain the world (nonscience). Later, powerful academics would draw new boundaries between what became disciplines steering scholars to devote themselves toward creating and applying analytical tools most relevant to their own territories. Knowledge production became like nation-states—bordered and bounded, always vigilant of border crossers. Today academics are encouraged to do interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work yet when they do, they often incur the wrath of "discipline"-arians given the discipline-oriented publication and reward system. This highlights how a key variety of BW is defending those very boundaries that give a domain identity and territory; transgressors keep the enforcers busy much as border guards with immigrants. People rarely perceive that they do BW whether by self-regulating or regulating others but people's BW negotiates social inclusion/exclusion. Principal BW vehicles are ridicule and gossip; today social media extend the discursive reach of this BW.

BW should not be seen primarily as socially conservative for through it people not only preserve cultural similarity, but also create and disseminate difference. First people learn cultural similarity as infants. As explained above, categorical thinking forges connections between infants' neurons inscribing a group's cultural pattern into the newborn's brain's neuronal networks (Ramachandran, 2011; Seung, 2012). Toddlers become experts

in enforcing these patterns. A boy wearing a dress is ridiculed and so on. Nonconformity is subjected to BW. As children enculturate they quickly become ethnocentric, favoring their group(s) over all others. Generating "us," then, categorically and simultaneously generates "them." Insiders and outsiders. So long as contact is limited to insiders the brain processes experiences on autopilot.

When children meet new people, however, their brains must quickly assess them as insiders or outsiders, as people like "us" and thus trustworthy or not. "Stranger anxiety" is the common term to describe this phenomenon. Now switch to the immigrant experience. An adult immigrant is fully enculturated; her neuronal networks are finely tuned to experiences with "her people" in her homeland circumstances. In the new context however, there are many differences. Her brain immediately perceives these differences—culture shock. She cannot turn this dissonance off for her brain is busy comparing new data against her stored patterns. For some time, immigration researchers have argued rightly that age of migration matters. The younger the age, the greater the likelihood that the migrant will fully acculturate. Neuroscience now explains this more profoundly than social science. That is, to acculturate, the many neuronal networks of an immigrant's brain that do not conform to native patterns have to be rewired and this becomes more and more difficult with age given physiological changes in the brain.

Natives often criticize immigrants for not being "willing" to integrate yet they do this BW without having an appreciation for how truly difficult acculturation is given our brains' culturally specific networking. Yes, there is neuroplasticity but rewiring neuronal networks is both difficult and dependent on age and other factors. If societies allow children at least 18 years to become full-fledged members—to complete their processes of cultural acquisition and social belonging, why, then, expect immigrants to take much less time when, indeed, the acculturation processes are as complex—and arguably more complex—as those of enculturation? Understanding enculturation should add to theorizing acculturation but to date this has not happened sufficiently.

Immigration and the Boundary Work Approach Even Beyond Acculturation

A nation-state has a boundary (border) and also establishes categories of social belonging to that polity. Immigrants do not originate within that territorial domain but transgress its boundary, sometimes individually and often as groups (e.g., refugees). People typically defend their social terrain against transgressors. In the immigration case this involves policing the ingress and egress of people across borders. When people obey established

mobility rules, they are provided an acceptable category of belonging within the polity (tourist or visitor, international student, immigrant, refugee, etc.). Some migrants, however, transgress ex-officially (illegally) and in so doing become objects of intense BW. Even immigrants who do play by the rules, however, are problematic because their belonging is liminal. They are neither natives (a group who categorically belongs) nor are they fully foreigners (a group who categorically does not belong). They are in between. Cognitive science now helps us explain why indeterminate categories are so disturbing and invite such antipathy as has become evident in many recipient countries. A useful social-cognitive science approach drawing upon the work of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*, Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, David Sibley in *Geographies of Exclusion* and others, illustrates that people who are socially located in between acknowledged categories are often perceived as dangerous to that social order. They may not be dangerous physically but they are dangerous psychologically and emotionally. The human brain seeks categorical order and therefore finds the disorderly, the dirty, the out-of-place, the border blurring, and so on problematic, disturbing. Moreover, with immigrants the misfit runs both ways.

Immigrants typically do not *feel* that they fully belong in their new society. Their minds readily identify differences while they, themselves, are often perceived as different (them) by the broader society. If they keep a low profile they might be ignored until they either leave or adapt to fit within the new society's acceptable boundaries. If, however, they remain liminal and particularly if they are also visible to natives their presence can and often does disturb the social order. This disorder produces anxieties and mobilizes some natives to eliminate the cause of the disturbance. In the case of immigration, mild forms of BW would include calls to halt the influx or to improve upon integration efforts; heightened feelings of fear typically produce discrimination, protests, even violence. Of course, over time and given changes in circumstances, the BW done can shift focus and/or attenuate even to the point where people no longer distinguish ethnic boundaries they once worked hard to maintain (Alba, 2005). Indeed, the *absence* of previously occurring ethnic BW typically indicates achieved assimilation.

Although boundaries evoke an image of straight, strong physical barriers such as walls, the reality is much less concrete. As the saying goes, good fences make good neighbors but fences were meant to be broken. Scholars theorizing social boundaries such as Zolberg and Long (1999) and Alba (2005) identify different types of boundaries and their cognitive significance. A bright boundary is one people readily "see" and typically do not cross—with some individual exceptions. Boundaries regularly crossed become "blurry" and thus the cognitive categories the boundary used to separate may disappear. A contemporary example of blurring boundaries is

the gradual social acceptance of gays in many societies (yet other societies are erecting brighter boundaries toward them). Meanwhile, categorical distinctions between immigrants and natives are brightening. What social criteria, then, generate bright versus blurry boundaries and under what conditions? This is a fruitful area for future immigration research. Some useful work has been done on the blurry boundaries of cultural borderlands. In the beginning of 1980s, borderlands scholarship began describing and theorizing such interstitial places. Spaces where hybridity and mixture reign whether celebrated or not, tend to attract very creative, vibrant people who thrive on the margins and often seek to disturb them further. They are discomforted not by borderlands but by the opposite—stifling order. In sum, people vary by how much order they need and desire. The more order the greater the BW and vice versa.

FUTURE BOUNDARY WORK RESEARCH NEEDED

Through BW people negotiate social status both *within* and between groups. To what degree are the social tools and characteristics used for inter-group BW also used for intragroup BW? What additional tools and criteria are used, if any? In addition, while much BW examines majority-minority relations is there any qualitative difference for people migrating from where they are majorities into minority situations versus migrant minorities moving to where they are again minorities, or even minorities moving to become part of a majority? Are there differences in the BW that occurs given these different circumstances? When the boundary is religion, there is a process (conversion) which helps people cross boundaries in multiple directions; the same is true for nationality (naturalization—a very odd term indeed). Yet with race and certain other embodied axes of differentiation, the directionality of crossing is much less flexible, though some people still cross. There is a need to research more the conditions of border permeability and even eradication.

Another, smaller yet related task is examining how immigrants do BW that reproduces the very borders of exclusion against them. For example, I have encountered immigrants applying certain dominant group BW criteria quite readily such as precluding African–Americans, Latinos and Asians from membership in the "true American" category while admitting Whites. What is their motivation? Are they just duped by the new system or are they more strategic, for example, maneuvering away from the bottom (see below)?

A third application is to analyze immigration BW among nations. A common refrain is to hear European leaders (and even some scholars) contrast their countries against the United States: "The United States is a nation of

immigrants. We are not," they insist. To know who you are requires knowing who you are not. Bringing in such cognitive factors without returning back to simple structuralist dualities is certainly a meaningful pursuit.

FROM SOCIAL CATEGORIES TO CATEGORICALLY UNEQUAL

Although all people learn and apply social categories, people do not enjoy equal power over these processes. Categorical BW inequality begins early. Infants have no choice but to learn the social categories and behavioral and cognitive norms from those around them. They gain greater agency as they age, but childhood is primarily a time of learning and doing BW quite rigidly. Elites enjoy greater influence and sometimes achieve near perfect "social closure" or exclusion of others (Massey, 2007), but it is critical to note that *everyone* participates at least in part to promote positive associations with ourselves and our group(s). In recent years I have researched social hierarchies among Hispanics living in South Florida. My students and I find that while Hispanic leaders as well as the broader non-Hispanic population often promote the idea that Hispanics are one group, Hispanics are busy doing BW amongst each other. The main criterion, as one research subject put it, is "Nobody wants to be at the bottom." What causes a group to occupy the bottom rung?

Different social categories are ranked (the importance of gender vs class or ethnicity) and these rankings have weights. Moreover these rankings and weights are contextual. When immigrants arrive into a new society the social categories they had learned as children and within which they had come to find belonging are either not present or they are negotiated differently in the new setting. Immigrants must learn the salient social categories in the new context(s), both those operative *within* their group(s) as well as those operative across groups. What they learn and apply as well as how quickly this occurs are both cognitive as well as contextual issues. Immigration scholars have overwhelmingly focused on the context side—for example, examining the receiving society's economy and its immigration laws—while largely overlooking the importance of cognition. It is time for a corrective, particularly now that *en*culturation is better understood. In terms of *ac*culturation, psychologists have been busy trying to create valid scales at the individual level; social scientists and novelists also chronicle immigrants' experiences and how they feel about them. Most work among social scientists, however, addresses more objective measures such as educational achievement and employment. Why not bring the enormous advances from enculturation work into conversation with all of us studying acculturation? Here are a few ideas for how this might work.

A first step would involve comparing enculturation processes in early life against adaptation to new cultural contexts later in life—acculturation. The pivot point here is the fact that once social patterns are stored in the brain, people pay attention to the new and largely ignore the known. This is done to preserve energy as the brain is an energy sink (Massey, 2007; Ramachandran, 2011). Thus, once learned, social categories and patterns largely drop from people's conscious awareness only to be brought to the surface when encountering people whose categories and patterns differ. Previous theorists have characterized these surfacings as "culture shock," "acculturative stress," "dual frame of reference," and so on. Being able to recognize difference is also central to theorizing why it makes sense to distinguish the perspectives of 1.0 versus 1.5 and 2.0 generations as many second-generation scholars do. In his 2007 article "Did Manufacturing Matter?" Waldinger argues that immigration researchers should pay attention more to country of childhood than of birth. What is really *needed is to understand enculturation of identifications* and apply that understanding to how people who migrate across *any* cultural border handle cultural differences. Social scientists arguing against "methodological nationalism" and for a broader paradigm on mobilities (Sheller & Urry, 2006) not just international migration recognize that the nation-state does not hold a monopoly on cultural differences. The approach proposed here is useful wherever we find cultural borders.

If theorized together, enculturation and acculturation may be effectively mapped onto the two primary yet integrated memory processes, one that is learned, long-term, highly subconscious and resistant to change (the neocortical system or what can be termed the outcome of enculturation's learning processes) and one that is more flexible, responsive to new stimuli and more conscious (the hippocampal system or what might be termed processes of acculturation) (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). People are cultural creatures of habit for whom the known is comforting and the new produces discomfort. Similarity and difference matter on both social and cognitive levels, but immigration scholars focus on the former level and could attend more to the latter. Studying immigrants' children—and not just teens and young adults—is a good area to develop.

Immigration scholars excel in chronicling peoples in contact and how they negotiate belonging and social standing at the social level. Yet there is room for improvement by examining how encountering difference produces varying responses: from conscious awareness to active interest or fascination; from desire and motivation to emulate to discomfort, dislike, and even disgust. These can and should be researched using traditional data collection tools as well as newer (and often more objective albeit also invasive) cognitive tools such as fMRI. Here the work of Susan T. Fiske and collaborators (2010,

2011) is exceptionally helpful and has been connected to immigrants and minority studies more generally in exceedingly important ways by Massey (2007). Fiske contends that there are just two basic criteria behind how people socially judge each other: warmth and competence. People judged to be both cold and incompetent are treated cognitively apart—and often dehumanized—from those occupying the other quadrants. This approach may explain why genocide and other atrocious acts can be perpetrated by otherwise "normal" people. It also underscores why understanding who is socially located at the bottom of a hierarchy is so important. That is, a fundamental task of BW is to stay off the bottom. To achieve this requires ensuring that one's group stays above at least one other group. Anthropologists have long noted that even food foragers will name themselves with terms equivalent to "the people" while naming another group the equivalent of "nonhuman"—the despised group in Fiske's scheme. In short, there is strong evidence that BW is universal, tied to being a cultural species in which enculturation minimally produces a category "us" and at least another "them."

Social newcomers are at risk for dropping to the lowest social status in the new context for at least two reasons: their presence promotes natives' awareness of differences and natives, particularly if constituting a majority group, typically sit on top of asymmetrical power relations. Infant (nonimmigrant newcomers) are lucky for people innately feel warm toward them even though they are the most incompetent members of society. For immigrant newcomers, however, competence and warmth must be negotiated. Competence is the easier axis to score highly on, particularly when immigrants' human capital matches local needs. Warmth is a much trickier criterion and merits most research. Surely measures of social distance due to race, religion, and so on, will affect natives' perceptions of newcomers' warmth as does condition of arrival ("illegal" vs refugee, etc.). I suggest plotting a series of typical terms applied to immigrants using Fiske's two-criterion model with warmth plotted on the *Y*-axis and competence on the *X*-axis. Use the grid to socially locate these categories: citizen, illegal, immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker, legal resident, denizen, wetback, and so on. The same should be done for different immigrant populations to a country (e.g., in the US context plotting Mexicans, Cubans, Koreans, Chinese, Asians, Middle Easterners, Indians). Plotting different *categories* of immigrants helps identify how societies view these outsiders. It also may explain why certain, but not all, immigrants become abjected. Plotting different *nationalities* and *ethnicities* help develop hypotheses about additional factors beyond immigrant status that inflect groups' social locations such as their racial or religious distinctiveness, educational levels, occupations, and so on. Plotting the same nationality across different historical periods (such as Chinese

in the US in the 1850s, 1910s, and 2000s) can also detect these factors and how groups' positioning shifts across history. This would open up studies mapping the key historical events and actors whose work changes the social locations of a group.

Finally, the utility of the categorical thinking/BW approach to understanding sociocultural belonging can be appreciated in simple daily interactions over language and dress. As people speak their native tongue with other native speakers they do not view this activity as erecting or reinforcing a social boundary. Yet if natives are in the company of people who are speaking a language that they do not understand, they perceive a boundary; they often feel excluded and uncomfortable. Immigrants speaking a language unfamiliar to natives are perceived as exclusionary (doing BW) but not vice versa given the asymmetries of majority-minority relations. Another classic case of BW is head coverings; they are culturally prescribed among certain religious groups and thus are key to both being accepted by and to feeling belonging to one's religious group. To *not* wear a covering not only invites group BW but is likely to also generate personal discomfort. What engenders this group's comfort, however, often produces discomfort to those for whom head coverings are not normative and, as in highly secular societies, where religious symbols are deemed acceptable only if subtle (e.g., ring, necklace). More obvious *embodied* symbols such as head coverings can, and often are, interpreted not just as individual or group expressions of belonging and identification, but as *statements to the greater society* about nonconformity to its boundaries.

Given that learning to belong to groups occurs so early in life, people act "normally" and do not perceive that the ways they think and behave send messages to others, messages of inclusion and exclusion. Consequently, social scientists need to raise these processes to greater public awareness much as has been done for people's multiple "identities" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Such an approach would be more praxis than structure-oriented; it could also aid in pinpointing the mechanisms behind often-cited but rarely documented situational and intersectional identifications. Imagine, for example, detailing how an immigrant child engages the majority society's sociocultural categories flawlessly at school only to perform a different set equally competently at home. Imagine that this child does not make to feel culturally *incompetent* because he is neither a full member of the parents' society nor of the new society. Rather, visualize this child being celebrated as demonstrating the very cultural flexibility *all* people can and should perform in the twenty-first century. What a paradigm shift that would be for scholar and subject alike.

CONCLUSION

Theorizing immigrant sociocultural adaptation, identification, and belonging arose in a world carving nation-states out of old empires and attaching national cultures to those territories. Whether intentional or not, the outcome for early social scientists examining immigration was to posit adaptation processes that end in perpetuated national cultures—in assimilation. Most scholars of migration question or eschew this trajectory, while many, if not most natives in countries receiving immigrants still desire this outcome. Currently, it is a lose-lose and highly politicized proposition, but one for which I see a solution by bringing enculturation into constructive analytical engagement with acculturation. Explaining that all people enculturate, how this occurs, how it affects the brain and how this inevitably leads to favoring one's own people over others sets the stage for encountering others. In addition, everyone's life is full of acculturations regardless of whether one migrates across international borders or not. Focusing on natives' adaptations (acculturations) to new and often discomforting circumstances (such as moving to a new town or school) can bridge their gap in understanding the immigrants' experiences and vice versa. This approach humanizes adaptation and opens up compassion for people whose acculturation processes are both more complex and undertaken at stages in life when the brain is more resistant to change.

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