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TRANSITIONS IN ACCULTURATION: The Psycho-Social Adjustments of American Immigrants

ABSTRACT

This qualitative dissertation tells the story of *American immigrant acculturation* and its development as a *distinct social process*---the shaping of which was influenced by the changing demography and sociology of the country, the changing nature of the immigrant flow over time and the marked recent development of advanced information and media technologies, which carried with them the *potential* power to help some transform the immigrant condition into a *post cultural* experience.

I will focus initially on a period starting with the Anglo/Northern Europe-centered, bounded, locally oriented America of the mid-nineteenth century and continuing through the period of the “new immigrants”---people from different European backgrounds and with different objectives for their lives in America. The American experience of these “new immigrants” came to be characterized in the early twentieth century as *the great American melting pot*---a construct that grew out of a stage play that gave an important voice to the side of an American contemporary debate favouring the emergence of a culturally blended America over an alternate view based on multiple cultural maintenance. The melting pot characterization, to which not all immigrants subscribed, could be thought of as America’s first large scale *acculturative period* as immigrants from many different backgrounds considered whether they wished to subscribe to a homogeneous mono-culture---with roots often different from their own but often consistent with their reasons for emigrating, including the experience of living in a more open society.

I will continue the story with discussion of changes in immigrant flow originated and energized from around 1965 by changes in American immigration law---activating a novel pattern in which those from Latin America and Asia came to dominate within the overall stream of immigrants, replacing previous European numerical dominance. Individuals in this new cohort differed substantially from many of those who came in

earlier periods---not only in terms of origin points but in a tendency to maintain the original culture while developing a separate “American” personality. This condition, referred to as *bi-culturality*, comprehends a state in which both personalities are available as separate entities when useful.

With this new cohort of immigrants came a new generation of energetic social scientists, often themselves from Hispanic or Asian origins. By largely studying their own ethnicities they moved the state of acculturational knowledge forward in a substantial way toward a broad model developed around the end of the twentieth century by Dr. John Berry, a cross-cultural psychologist. I have attempted to increase the utility of this model with an interpretive framework called *ACES* (an acronym for *Anchoring, Communication, Enjoyment and Sensitivity*). These two constructs (the Berry model and *ACES* interpretive framework) allow for a distinction to be made between *different degrees of bi-culturality*, with the more complete version of the condition (*full bi-culturality*) characterized by ability to act in *each* culture as if *uni-cultural in that culture* ---free from excessive psychological or behavioural constraints emanating from the alternate culture. I show why it might be easier for some individuals than for others to become fully bi-cultural and also show how *ACES* can be scored differently to compare individuals on conditions other than full bi-culturality.

Having covered mono-cultural (melting pot) and bi-cultural adjustment strategies I will turn to a different modality---referred to as *hybrid culturality* (or sometimes *pastiche*)---in which an original culture remains but is augmented by bits and pieces that the individual chooses to appropriate, to form a kind of *personally relevant blended cultural mixture*. I will utilize *immigrant Muslims* as a medium for exploring this third version of acculturative adjustment. Hybrid culturality does not have universal appeal to American Muslims and some choose to maintain their traditional culture in the American context, or to adapt in other ways. However the combination for many Muslims of a strong religion and multiple options for situating themselves relative to it make this group attractive as an illustrative vehicle.

Following periods in which acculturational development was impacted by major changes in the nature of the flow of immigrants coming to America a period ensued during which

dramatic growth in advanced information and media technologies introduced an important new dimension. Initially described by Gergen (1991) as *the technologies of social saturation* this development massively increased international connectivity, produced instant access to a huge variety of information resulting in time-space compression and to a general speeding up of life for those who had access to and interest in it. These technologies helped many to approach an *orientation of post culturality* by helping to dissolve previous cultural boundaries through exposure to a much wider range of life definitions, opinions and outlooks. The post cultural orientation, as I use the term in this dissertation, envisions *the ability to react fluidly to changing contextual or interpersonal situations*. This post cultural orientation, where all boundaries of culture have disappeared, is often facilitated by advanced technology. However, other ways of encountering and appropriating large amounts of unique and different input can, either with or without advanced technology, also lead to post culturality.

Not all newcomers to America conform to the post cultural profile. Many immigrants continue to follow other patterns of adjustment---including those described earlier. Additionally some of those who are themselves not immigrants---for example, second generation individuals from immigrant families---have also found some of the discussed approaches helpful in their own continuing adjustment.

While it could be appropriate to think of the four above described phases---mono-cultural, bi-cultural, hybrid cultural and post cultural---as developments along a *spectrum* of American acculturative adjustments they could also be regarded, as I have regarded them above, as *orientations* favoured by various conditions that the person might have experienced. They do not necessarily comprise a developmental sequence with stages through which one moves but are *individually relevant, allowing for movement in or out* depending on what is appropriate and desired by the individual at the time.

In telling the story of American immigrant acculturation as a social process I will utilize theory written by others, my own developing ideas and twenty-one interviews, mostly with immigrant individuals and in a few cases with scholars. Protocols for these interviews---batches of which pertain to different objectives---can be found in Appendix A. Some featured standard questions, others were more tailored to individual areas of

interviewee experience or strength in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding in what was more of a preliminary exploration. I will provide illustrative case examples from Hispanic, Japanese, Muslim and other cultures. While making occasional comparative references to developments in Europe my story is primarily about the American case. I do not focus heavily on either Native American Indians or early African Americans, both groups which I feel are important enough in American history to deserve separate in-depth coverage. I do make reference to these groups from time to time. My fundamental perspective in writing this document is not so much that of a career social scientist as that of an experienced international businessman. The combination of my business experience and academic study will allow for a *blended viewpoint* which will hopefully provide useful perspective to others in business as well as in other pursuits in today's increasingly complex, high stakes and cosmopolitan world.

I will begin in the First Chapter with background materials about immigration and acculturation to provide context for subsequent discussion. Chapter TWO will discuss the influence of an early twentieth century play, *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill, on characterization at the time of the immigrant condition in America. I will at that point review the scholarly literature on acculturation and show how it supported a change in characterization from earlier ideas influenced by *The Melting Pot* to an alternative concept based on *bi-culturality*. Chapter THREE will focus further on theory, introducing the *Berry Acculturational Model* and describing my *ACES Interpretive Framework* as useful ways of understanding bi-culturality. Chapter FOUR will show how many *Hispanics and Asians* live a basically bi-cultural life in America and show through narratives developed from eight interviews with Hispanic and Japanese immigrants---using the Berry model and ACES framework for interpretive purposes---how differences in realizing the *the full bi-culturality condition* develop between basically bi-cultural groups and between individuals from the same group. The next two chapters will explore *hybrid culturality* through the lens of the *Muslim immigrant*. Through a combination of historical analysis, discussion of Islamic theology and applications to present day context in Chapter FIVE, and quotations from ten Muslim interviews in Chapter SIX I will show how some Muslims adopt their own individualized version of adjustment to American life while some from their group resist these trends.

Chapter SEVEN focuses on *post culturality*. First I will describe the rapid development of the technologies of social saturation, particularly in America and other industrialized countries, in recent years. Then I will document the uneven overall international growth of these technologies, along with trends that might even out the development geographically over time. I will discuss how the post cultural condition develops, beginning with scholars' quotes from the literature. I will interview three post cultural individuals---immigrants from different countries---then show through comparison of my daughter's background with my own at her age (as I remember it) how substantially different early experience with technology can nevertheless lead to the same condition of post culturality. Chapter EIGHT will contain a brief summary of the dissertation and end with reflections on what I have learned from writing it, along with a discussion of what implications this knowledge might have.