Acculturation Strategies of Young Immigrants Living in Belgium: The View of Young Belgian Nationals

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Abstract

In contemporary society, migration has become a key topic. According to Berry (1997), individuals might display different attitudes and behaviors in the process of acculturation, defined as cultural and psychological changes resulting from the direct contact among members of multiple cultures. Whereas most research has concentrated on the acculturation strategies of immigrants, the aim of this study is to focus on the preferences of members of the receiving society. In particular, we analyze which strategy young Belgians consider the most suitable for immigrants to adopt, using a sample of Belgian students between the ages of 18 and 29 years living in Brussels. We account for several variables to shed light on the important aspects of intergroup relationships between host nationals and immigrants.

Theoretical background

Migration is an age-old concept, as people have always traveled from one place to another to settle down. In Europe, migration has become even more of a key issue in the past years, with people both immigrating to Europe from other continents and migrating from one European country to another. In 2012, more than three million people immigrated from outside to one of the EU-27 Member States, while another two and a half million left one of the EU-27 Member States[1]. Thus, migration has, out of necessity, required European countries to become increasingly more multicultural (Phalet & Swyngedouw, 2003; Van Oudenhoven, 2006). In Belgium, the focus of this study, immigrants represented approximately 11% (1,195,122) of the total population (approximately 11 million) in 2012, most of them coming from other countries of the European Union (70%)[2]. Italians constituted the largest immigrant group (13.2% of all immigrants to the Belgian territory), followed by the French (12.8%). Portuguese immigrants were less represented (3.2%). Approximately 15% of immigrants to Belgium came from the African continent, among which the largest subgroup was made up of Moroccan immigrants (7%).

In the context of migration, acculturation strategies refer to the attitudes and behaviors individuals display when they come into contact with other cultural groups. Most research has focused on the processes of acculturation with regard to non-dominant groups (i.e., immigrants), assuming that intercultural contact has a greater impact on the non-dominant group than the receiving society (*i.e.*, the dominant group). By contrast, scant research has examined the consequences of acculturation processes for the dominant groups (*i.e.*, the members of the receiving society) (Berry, 2001).

Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that acculturation is a bidirectional process, as assumed in the original anthropological definition of acculturation as "subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). Thus, acculturation concerns both members of the non-dominant and dominant groups by engendering cultural and psychological changes in both groups' cultural patterns (Berry, 2003). Berry (1997) established a model of acculturation strategies derived from two basic issues regarding the different orientations individuals or groups might exhibit toward their own and other cultural groups. From the non-dominant group's perspective, Berry's model distinguishes four different acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. For the dominant group, which in most cases is the majority of the population or receiving society, the four strategies (each corresponding to one of the non-dominant group's strategies) include multiculturalism (*integration*), melting pot (*assimilation*), segregation (*separation*), and exclusion (*marginalization*) (Berry, 2001).

Several studies reveal the receiving society's preference for assimilation (Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998). Research has also shown the host population's preference for the integration strategy, which is assumed to result in greater well-being for both groups—immigrants and receiving society members (Rohmann, Florack, & Piontkowski, 2006).

Various studies have also highlighted the important roles of perceived similarity (Billiet, Carton, & Huys, 1990) and the quality of intergroup contact (Islam & Hewstone, 1993) in the context of the acculturation process. Regarding perceived similarity, research has shown that acceptance of the out-group by in-group members is greater when these two groups share many characteristics (*e.g.*, Lott & Lott, 1965; Van Oudenhoven, Judd, & Hewstone, 2000). Indeed, similarity can be gratifying because it confirms the veracity of an individual's own beliefs and values (Byrne, 1971). Conversely, perceived cultural distance is more likely to lead to complications in the groups' adaptation to each other (Michinov & Michinov, 2011). Regarding intergroup contact, several variables might improve or deteriorate the relationship between two or more groups, such as cultural knowledge about the other group (Pettigrew, 1998); common goals, attitudes, and value orientations (Allport, 1954; Voss, Albert, & Ferring, 2014); or the quality of contact itself (Islam & Hewstone, 1993). Harmonious relationships will more likely result from a higher perceived concordance of acculturation attitudes and behaviors between

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[1] See http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics.

[2] See http://www.diversite.be/rapport-annuel-migration-2013.

the groups, whereas perceived discordance will cause more conflictual relationships (Rohmann et al., 2006).

All these aspects might also influence host nationals' preferences for a specific acculturation strategy of immigrants in their daily life interactions. For example, lower perceived similarity (*i.e.*, higher cultural distance) and a more negative perception of the quality of intergroup contact might influence majority group members' preferences for the assimilation or even the separation strategy, as a rejection of the foreign culture. Conversely, higher perceived similarity (*i.e.*, lower cultural distance), in addition to a pleasant and advantageous intergroup contact perception, might facilitate cultural knowledge of the unknown culture and lead to greater acceptance of a multicultural society, favoring integration of immigrants.

Research questions

The main aim of this study was to analyze young Belgians' perceptions of and preferences for the acculturation strategies displayed by their similarly aged counterparts with a migration background. Because differences might exist in these young Belgians' preferences for a specific acculturation strategy depending on the target person's culture of origin, we focused on two immigrant communities in Belgium: Portuguese and Moroccan young immigrants. Proceeding in this way allowed us to control not only for the effects of participants' acculturation strategy but also for any effects of their cultural origin (Kosic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2005). We report the findings of which acculturation strategies young Belgians prefer that immigrants living in Belgium display in more detail elsewhere (see Coimbra, Albert, Ferring, & Assaad, submitted). In this chapter, we focus on the interrelationships among three variables regarding young Belgians' acculturation expectations: attitudes, behavioral tendencies, and intergroup relationships.

Method

Participants

In this study, 120 Belgian students (48 males, and 72 females) responded to a standardized questionnaire. The average age was 22.07 years (SD = 2.03; range: 18 to 29 years). All participants were university students (118 from the Free University of Brussels ULB [Université Libre de Bruxelles], and two from different graduate schools), living in Brussels. Participants were required to have Belgian nationality and French language proficiency, as only a French version of the questionnaire was available.

Measures

Participants were randomly assigned to six different groups of 20 people each. To reduce the risks of any potential bias due to social desirability or the influence from read-

3. We considered three different acculturation strategies for the scenarios (Van Oudenhoven, Hofstra, & Buunk, 2005): integration, assimilation, and separation (Berry, 2001). According to several studies, the marginalization strategy is the least adopted of the four acculturation strategies, thus leading us to exclude it from our study.

ing the other scenarios, each group was provided with one specific scenario, combining one of the two cultural origins (Portuguese or Moroccan) with one of the three analyzed acculturation strategies (assimilation, integration, or separation)3. A male target person of the second generation of immigrants served as the main character in all scenarios (see Appendix). After reading the scenario, participants responded to a standardized questionnaire containing different variables.

Three items asked about participants' cultural knowledge and contact with the respective culture of origin of the target character. Another block of items focused on attitudes of young Belgians toward the main character's acculturation strategy; 17 items assessed affective components (*e.g.*, affection, frustration), based on Izard's Differential Emotions Scale (Izard, Dougherty, Bloxom, & Kotsch, 1974); and 19 items measured cognitive components, such as loyalty and selfishness (see Dambrun & Guimond, 2004).

We assessed participants' behavioral tendencies toward the main character with nine items based on the Reconciliation Sentiment Questionnaire (*e.g.*, "I think I could become friends with him") used by Mukashema and Mullet (2010). Furthermore, participants were asked to rate the quality of the intergroup contact between Belgians and the cultural group of the target person in the scenario using six items (*e.g.*, "I feel that relationships between the two groups are currently hostile"). We also assessed participants' ideas about how the Belgian culture would be perceived by the respective immigrant group (meta-perception) using two items (*e.g.*, "I think they would consider Belgians as welcoming and cooperative").

In addition, we assessed the young Belgians' sense of their own national identity and their views of their own cultural group using 10 items (*e.g.*, "Being Belgian is very important for me"). Items were rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*low agreement*) to 8 (*high agreement*). All reliabilities were satisfactory (.75 > α < .93). We found no differences in participants' age, gender, or national identity (for more detailed information, see Coimbra et al., submitted).

Results

Overall, we found strong positive correlations between both positive affective (*i.e.*, positive emotions) and cognitive (*i.e.*, positive attributed adjectives) components of attitudes and behavioral tendencies of young Belgian nationals toward their counterparts with migration backgrounds. Correlations between the positive cognitive components of attitudes and behavioral tendencies ($r = .57$; $n = 120$; $p < .01$) turned out to be even higher than correlations between affective components of attitudes and behavioral tendencies ($r = .36$; $n = 120$; $p < .01$). We observed a similar pattern between the positive affective component of attitudes and the perception of intergroup relationships between Belgian nationals and Portuguese and Moroccan immigrants ($r = .21$; $n = 120$; $p < .02$). However, we found no significant correlation between the positive cognitive component

of attitudes and the intergroup relationship variable.

Regarding the negative components of attitudes, we observed several significant results. Both negative affective and cognitive components were negatively correlated with behavioral tendencies (negative felt emotions: $r = -.37$; $n = 120$; $p < .01$; negative attributed adjectives: $r = -.37$; $n = 120$; $p < .01$). However, only the negative cognitive component showed a negative and significant correlation with intergroup relationships ($r = -.22$; $n = 120$; $p < .01$); we found no correlation between the negative affective component and intergroup relationships. Finally, as expected, meta-perception also correlated positively with almost all the variables, except the negative affective component of attitudes. Table 1 reports the correlations between the variables.

Table 1
Correlations between several variables regarding acculturation strategies

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 I like X's culture.	-	.26**	.33**	-.06	.38**	.00	.34**	.38**	.16
2 I agree with his way of speaking.		-	.49**	-.31**	.73**	-.35**	.52**	.18	.44**
3 Positive emotions			-	.04	.60**	-.16	.36**	.21*	.30**
4 Negative emotions				-	-.32**	.56**	-.37**	-.16	-.15
5 Positive attributed adjectives					-	-.32**	.57**	.17	.48**
6 Negative attributed adjectives						-	-.37**	-.22*	-.25**
7 Behavior toward migrants							-	.42**	.49**
8 Intergroup relationships between migrants and hosts								-	.31**
9 Meta-perception of natives									-

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Several interrelationships emerged among the different variables regarding young Belgian nationals' perceptions of the displayed acculturation strategies of second-generation immigrants in Belgium. More positive emotions toward an immigrant and his or her culture, as well as more positive attributes, were related to a globally more positive behavior toward that immigrant's community and his or her culture in general. In contrast, the more participants attributed negative personality traits to an immigrant, the more they perceived these trains in a negative way as well. Unfortunately, correlations do not allow us to discern the actual direction of the relationship between two variables. However, the findings are in line with the similarity–attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), according to which the more positive emotions felt and the more positive personality features attributed to an individual (immigrants in this context), the more positive are people's behavior toward that individual. In contrast, a decrease in the agreement with how an immigrant expresses him- or herself (*e.g.*, regarding his or her culture) is related to an increase in felt negative emotions and negative behavior toward that individual and, thus, toward the cultural group to which he or she belongs. Together, appreciating a culture and having positive feelings toward it are crucial for good intergroup relationships (Pettigrew, 1998; Rohmann *et al.*, 2006).

In light of the results, it would also be reasonable to assume that the separation strategy, which in general brings up more negative feelings, might also be related to more negative intergroup relationships. In contrast, integration and assimilation strategies generally evoke more positive emotions related to positive behavior and, therefore, to more positive relationships between cultural groups (see Coimbra *et al.*, submitted).

One of the limitations in this study was the chosen sample. We focused on a young university student sample, which does not allow for generalization of the results regarding the multicultural ideologies to the global Belgian population. Furthermore, the acculturation vignettes employed in the study (see Appendix) are hypothetical and include neither complex daily life situations nor diverse life domains, such as the distinction between public and private life as distinguished by Phalet and Swyngedouw (2003).

Further research could include other age groups of both the host nationals and the target immigrant groups. Research could also examine the majority's and minority's preferences for acculturation strategies, specifically regarding the different elements that influence the interaction between groups.

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Author note

Appendix

Integration

X is a young student born in Belgium from Moroccan/Portuguese parents. His parents emigrated from their country of origin for financial and economic reasons. From his point of view, "*Belgium and Morocco/Portugal are two different countries with differ-ent cultures.*" He always wondered to which of these two cultures he actually really be-longed.

"*I am now convinced that I am really Moroccan/Portuguese and at the same time I am Belgian…. In fact, I speak both languages fluently and I am aiming to be able to contin-ue improving my skills in both languages…. I have Belgian friends as well as Moroccan/Portuguese friends at work and in my spare time…I really feel at home when I am in Bel-gium but also while visiting Morocco/Portugal…. I feel deeply connected to the Belgian culture and at the same time to the Moroccan/Portuguese culture.*"

Assimilation

X is a young student born in Belgium from Moroccan/Portuguese parents. His par-ents emigrated from their country of origin for financial and economic reasons. From his point of view, "*Belgium and Morocco/Portugal are two different countries with differ-ent cultures.*" He always wondered to which of these two cultures he actually really be-longed.

"*I am now convinced that I am now much more Belgian than Moroccan/Portuguese…. In fact, I speak better French than Arabian/Portuguese and I am aiming to continue im-proving my skills in French, while my Arabian/Portuguese proficiency is weak but I don't feel the urge to do more about it… Besides most of my friends are Belgians…. I adapt well to the Belgian lifestyle and I really feel at home when I am in Belgium, which isn't the case when I return to Morocco/Portugal…. I feel deeply connected to the Belgian.*"

Separation

X is a young student born in Belgium from Moroccan/Portuguese parents. His par-ents emigrated from their country of origin for financial and economic reasons. From his point of view, "*Belgium and Morocco/Portugal are two different countries with differ-ent cultures.*" He always wondered to which of these two cultures he actually really be-longed.

"*I am convinced that I am really Moroccan/Portuguese much more than I am Bel-gian…. In fact, I speak better Arabian/Portuguese than French and I am aiming to main-tain it that way…. Honestly, the languages of Belgium just interest me for practical rea-sons…. Besides, most of my friends are also Moroccan/Portuguese with just professional relations with Belgian citizens…. Even if I do adapt to the Belgian lifestyle, I don't really feel at home here, whereas in Morocco/Portugal, I do feel really at home…. I feel deeply connected to the Moroccan/Portuguese culture.*"