

Social influences on the adaptation to a new cultural environment



RESEARCH

‘Advancing acculturation theory and research: The acculturation process in its ecological context’

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Background

In a highly globalised world travellers, migrants, and those living in multicultural countries must confront different values and practices in their adaptation to the new host country.

The adaptation process often involves a re-evaluation and change in one’s beliefs, behaviours, and identities. This change can be stressful and people often cope with it in different ways, which can affect how well they adjust.

What distinguishes those who adapt well from those who don’t?

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, re-evaluated the current psychological frameworks we use to understand acculturation research in order to consider the many different factors that influences a person’s successful adaptation into a new culture.

Main research findings

Researchers are more often finding that most immigrants and short-term travellers are coping with their new environment by adopting features of their new host culture.

Although there are individual differences associated with cross-cultural adaptation, such as emotional stability and personality characteristics, many researchers forget to take into account the social contexts such as the influence of family, institutions, and society.

It has been found that family dynamics are also an important part of the adaptation process with a more cohesive family unit leading to better adjustment.

In schools, pressures from peers and teachers to conform to the traditions of the host culture can lead immigrants to feel separated. In contrast, giving more social support can lead to more positive attitudes toward the settlement country and as a result lead to better adaptation. This extends to the business and policy environments, where more inclusive policies help minority groups become more engaged.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

With immigrants making up a large portion of the New Zealand population, it is important for skilled migrants to feel well adjusted in their new environment. In order to achieve this we need to have a complete conceptualisation of how the acculturation process works so successful adaptation can be facilitated.

New Zealand schools systems can contribute by showing support to immigrant students. Businesses should embrace diversity in the workplace by showing it is valued. Finally, policies should reflect the appreciation of diversity.

Social service professionals and counsellors should consider how all of these social contexts might affect students. Employers, team leaders, and advisors should also consider how policies and the social work environment might facilitate or hinder the successful adaptation of migrants and workers.