INDICATORS OF ACCULTURATION: A BILINEAR, MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

Dina Drankus
School of Social Service Administration
University of Chicago

Abstract

This paper presents an instrument for assessing a client's level of acculturation. The instrument has been designed for use by social work clinicians working with clients that affiliate or identify with a culture of origin that differs from mainstream culture in the United States. This bilinear, multidimensional instrument is composed of thirty indicators organized into three domains: language, cultural behavior, and cultural knowledge. Existing research that informed the domain selection is reviewed and the rationale behind the inclusion of each indicator is given. The instrument is presented in such a way as to show how it should be adapted or augmented as needed by practitioners in their work with clients. The paper shows how instrument is designed to: (1) increase practitioner understanding of a client's degree of acculturation; (2) increase the practitioner's cultural awareness and sensitivity; and (3) increase the practitioner's recognition of the impact of acculturation on other health, psychological, and behavioral outcomes and health and social service utilization.

Culture consists of the learned symbols, language, behavior, tradition, and ideas that are distinct among different groups of people. Individual acculturation refers to that complex, dynamic process of adaptation that takes place when one interacts with a new, dominant culture. Defining acculturation is complicated by the ever-changing context in which acculturation occurs, due largely to the socially constructed, dynamic nature of culture (Bennett 2005; Bennett, Bennett and Landis 2004; Bidney 1947; Handwerker 2002; Wolf 1984; Wolf 1982). According to Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, 149): "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 traditional and broad definition, however, has left the assessment of individual- and group-levels of acculturation open to varying approaches and practitioners working with bicultural clients in need of an appropriate and effective method for assessing a client's level of acculturation. An instrument to better understand levels of acculturation, will ideally promote culturally competent practice.

While the concept of acculturation predicts impacts at both the cultural and individual levels, this paper concentrates on the ways in which the acculturative process manifests itself in individual-level adaptive changes. It further defines indicators of acculturation as those reasonably objective, reportable aspects of an individual's adaptation rather than how the individual has processed, or made sense of, his or her acculturative process. For example, asking how often an individual speaks English at work requires less reflection than asking an individual if he or she feels US-American. In other words, understanding and describing one's identity is beyond the scope of the acculturation instrument presented here. The goal of all instrument indicators is to create an individual acculturation profile based on reported language, behaviors, and knowledge that can be compared to broader dominant cultural norms.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE INSTRUMENT

The instrument presented here is multidimensional and bilinear. Multidimensionality refers to assessing acculturation across multiple domains and bilinearity refers to the instrument's ability to capture non-inverse relationships in the individual's participation in the heritage and the dominant cultures (i.e., participation in one culture does not preclude participation in the other culture) (Zea, Asner-Self, Birman, and Buk 2003). The presentation below refers to heritage culture and dominant culture. Heritage culture is often referred to as the home culture or culture of origin in the literature. Dominant culture is often referred to as mainstream US culture, receiving culture, or host culture in the literature. Finally, it is important to note that many of the studies referenced differ in their conceptualization of acculturation and in their operationalization of indicators of acculturation, but these studies include features or outcomes that support or relate to the given selection of indicators of acculturation.

Gordon's (1964) model of unidirectional, unilinear assimilation shows a heritage culture permanently shed as an individual becomes more assimilated to the host culture. This may have been descriptive of the migrant assimilation experience in the late part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, but migrants today do not necessarily cleave their home culture as they become acculturated to a

new one. Acculturation today is most often a bilinear process that occurs across multiple domains, or dimensions, of an individual's life. A bilinear approach that pairs indicators can better account for the high participation in behaviors related to a new culture without precluding the respondent's high participation in behaviors related to her heritage culture. Similarly, the use of a bilinear instrument allows for a tracking of low participation in behaviors related to both a dominant and a heritage culture.

The bilinear approach offers additional benefits. Several studies comparing the use of unidimensional measures and bidimensional measures have found the use of bidimensional measures reveals non-inverse relationships between the dominant and heritage cultural orientations. Therefore it better captures relationships between acculturation, identity, and quality of life indicators (Abe-Kim, Okazaki and Goto 2001; Lee, Sobal and Frongillo 2003; Lieber, Chin, Nihira and Mink 2001; Nguyen, Messé and Stollak 1999; Ryder, Alden and Paulhaus 2000; Tsai 2001; Tsai, Ying and Lee 2000). Since bidimensional measures are more valid and useful in assessing a client's level of acculturation, practitioners relying on unilinear indicators risk uncritically accepting the dominant ideology of the host country as the endpoint of the acculturative process and thus making normative and prescriptive statements to clients regarding their acculturative goals (Adrados 1997; Berry 2003). The bilinear approach, therefore, refuses to problematize perceived non-acculturation or non-assimilation.

The importance of a bilinear approach in assessing levels of acculturation is further maintained by studies that demonstrate the value of emotional or social support from the heritage culture in mediating acculturative stress and decreasing the likelihood of poor mental and physical health outcomes. The bilinear approach also offers the researcher the ability to distinguish between, or isolate, the impact of social support found in the dominant culture versus the support found in the heritage culture. These studies suggest that using a unilinear model of acculturation may miss the connection between a client's ties with his or her heritage culture and healthy socio-psychological and physical functioning, as well as the nuances of an individual's support system (Finch and Vega 2003; Lee, Crittenden and Yu 1996; Vega, Kolody, Valle and Weir 1991; Ward and Kennedy 1993).

The instrument has three domains of indicators: language, cultural behavior, and cultural knowledge. Language has long been recognized as a primary mechanism of cultural conveyance and this instrument's design assumes that respondents have a cultural tie to a culture in which the dominant language is not English. The indicators within the cultural behavior and cultural knowledge domains act as both proxies and, in some cases, direct measures for client participation in social institutions.

According to Bidney (1947, 375), culture is "communicated largely by language or symbolic forms and through participation in social institutions," and therefore the indicators measure the frequency of client contact with the language and social institutions of both the dominant and heritage cultures.

This instrument is designed for use in a variety of client-practitioner relationships. The indicators are relevant across cultures and allow practitioners to alter the base indicators to best fit the client's unique social-psychological context. However, while this instrument can be easily administered to adolescent and adult clients, it would not be optimal for use with child clients, as questions assume the client's self-selection of media and friendship. All indicators contain brief and clear language and responses are on a 6-point Likert scale. Respondents can answer easily, answers can be standardized and compared over time, and additional variation in responses can be captured.

THE INSTRUMENT: THIRTY INDICATORS OVER THREE DOMAINS

Pre-Instrument Questions

The purpose of the pre-instrument questions is to acquire the ethnicity and language with which the client identifies herself. These questions give the client the opportunity to identify her ethnicity and language and prevent the practitioner from making assumptions about the client's ethnicity and the language associated with that ethnicity. The pre-assessment questions are presented as such:

What is your ethnicity?
(The response to this question will be referred to as X in later statements/questions.)

What language is generally associated with this ethnicity?
(The response to this question will be referred to as Y in later statements/questions.)

THE INSTRUMENT: DOMAIN 1: LANGUAGE
Indicators within the domain of language usage and fluency are consistently included in instruments designed to assess a respondent's level of acculturation and are shown to be significant indicators of acculturation (Cuéllar, Arnold and Maldonado 1995; Cortés, Rogler

and Malgady 1994; Félix-Ortiz, Newcomb and Myers 1994; Mendoza 1989; Stephenson 2000; Zea, Asner-Self, Birman and Buki 2003). Some measurements of acculturation only use indicators related to language (Kamo and Zhou 1994; Krause and Goldenhar 1992). This instrument measures language usage rather than language competence or language preference. The bilinear format assesses how English and Y are (or are not) integrated into the client's life.

The following pair of indicators assess the client's self-perceived, overall language competence. English language fluency indicates client adaptation to the dominant US culture, while Y language fluency indicates ties to the heritage culture.

	Not at all	Very Low	Low	Fair	High	Very High
Indicator 1: Rate your English language fluency (or how comfortable you are using the English language).						
Indicator 2: Rate your Y language fluency (or how comfortable you are using the Y language).						

The following indicators in this domain assess actual language usage overall, and in more specific situations and focus on frequency rather than subjective assessments of quality (such as, "How well do you speak English at school or work?"). Frequent use of the English language—a straight-forward, easily-answered question—has been shown to be a significant indicator of acculturation to the dominant culture. A client's perceived quality of language use in different scenarios is more indicative of acculturative stress than level of acculturation and is more fitting of the conversation that follows the client's completion of the instrument, when further reflection is required to grapple with the client's perception of the acculturative process.

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 3: How often do you speak English on a daily basis?						
Indicator 4: How often do you speak Y on a daily basis?						

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 5: How often do you speak English at school or work?						
Indicator 6: How often do you speak Y on at school or work?						

The indicators highlighting the client's school or work environment can, in conjunction with additional indicators, give the practitioner a sense of whether or not the client has opportunities at work or school to speak Y, whether or not the client is electively speaking or not speaking Y, and may hint at other constraints on language usage in the client's environment. Speaking English at school or work may indicate client adaptation to the dominant culture, whereas speaking Y at school or work may indicate a linkage to his or her heritage culture.

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 7: How often do you speak English with family?						
Indicator 8: How often do you speak Y with family?						

These indicators highlights the client's home environment and gives the practitioner a comparison point in terms of Y usage at home compared to at school or work. If English is often spoken at home, this would indicate another level of adaptation to the dominant culture, as home usage of English would often be a more voluntary usage of English.

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 9: How often do you write in English during a typical day?						
Indicator 10: How often do you write in Y during a typical day?						

  Writing in one language rather than another (or writing in both equally or in neither at all) gives the practitioner additional information on the client's ties to his or her heritage culture as well as the client's adaptation to the dominant culture.

DOMAIN 2: CULTURAL BEHAVIOR

Similar to the domain of language, indicators within the domain of cultural behavior are also consistently included in instruments designed to assess the respondent's level of acculturation (Cuéllar, Arnold and Maldonado 1995; Cortés, Rogler and Malgady 1994; Félix-Ortiz, Newcomb and Myers 1994; Mendoza 1989; Stephenson 2000). Behavior can often tell a practitioner more about a client's level of acculturation than simply asking questions devoted to preference. Reporting on behavior requires less reflection from the client (and controls more for client subjectivity) than requesting information on preferences. Zea, Asner-Self, Birman, and Buki (2003) do not use indicators in the domain of cultural behavior in their instrument, claiming behavior is more a function of availability of media from the heritage culture than a function of preference.

  While a lack of availability may preclude the client's participation in certain activities, participation in behaviors (such as consumption of media from the heritage or dominant culture) can be taken to indicate levels of acculturation in each culture, *regardless of the client's preferred behavior*. Furthermore, as Mendoza (1989) argues, increased contact with a non-heritage culture increases the likelihood of cultural change.

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 11: How often do you watch English-language television programs?						

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 12: How often do you watch Y-language television programs?						
Indicator 13: How often do you watch English-language movies?						
Indicator 14: How often do you watch Y-language movies?						

The language used in a specific activity, whether watching television, going to a movie, reading a newspaper, or listening to music, frequently involves the transmission of culture. A client's regular participation in activities in either English or Y may indicate client behaviors imbued with dominant or heritage cultural content, respectively. It may also suggest the outcome of limited English language ability.

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 15: How often do you read English-language newspapers?						
Indicator 16: How often do you reach Y-language newspapers?						
Indicator 17: How often do you read English-language magazines?						
Indicator 18: How often do you read Y-language magazines?						

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 19: How often do you listen to English-language music?						
Indicator 20: How often do you listen to Y-language music?						

DOMAIN 3: CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Cultural knowledge, which refers to knowledge of cultural referents, has been demonstrated to be a significant dimension of acculturation in studies such as those conducted by Félix-Ortiz and others (1994) and Stephenson (2000). Zea and others (2003) suggest that cultural knowledge is indicative of cultural competence, or the capacity to function successfully in a specific culture, which is an important factor in assessing an individual's level of acculturation. These following indicators therefore are intended to assess how familiar the client is with this aspect of the US-national identity. These indicators may be understood as part of the socialization process of US-Americans and may be indicative of some level of client adaptation to the dominant US culture.

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 21: I know US-American national heroes.						
Indicator 22: I know national heroes from X.						
Indicator 23: I know US-American political leaders.						
Indicator 24: I know political leaders from X.						

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 25: I know popular US-American television shows.						
Indicator 26: I know popular television shows in Y language.						

Familiarity with popular television shows in the dominant or heritage culture (or both) indicates an understanding of the popular aspects of the culture. Such understanding may allow the client to participate fluidly in the dominant culture, depending on the client's environment and his or her actual interaction with the dominant US culture. Similarly, familiarity with popular aspects of the heritage culture may allow the client to recognize popular heritage culture references with family or community, and may thereby allow for the creation of a social support network. It is possible to suggest that the client's social support network in his or her heritage culture may further improve client ease in maneuvering in the dominant culture through, for instance, increased self-esteem through identification and participation with his or her heritage culture. Such extrapolation on the benefits of maintaining linkages to the heritage culture is of course beyond the scope of this instrument and may easily be applied to any of the indicators.

Familiarity with popular printed materials, in combination with frequent reading of English-language materials, may indicate a client's a confidence in, and adaptation to, the dominant culture. Likewise, recognizing popular actors, in combination with frequent viewing of English-language media, may similarly indicate confidence in, and adaptation to, the dominant culture.

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 27: I know popular US-American newspapers or magazines.						
Indicator 28: I know popular newspapers or magazines in Y language.						

	Not at all	Very little	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Indicator 29: I know popular US-American actors and actresses.						
Indicator 30: I know popular actors and actresses from X.						

CONCLUSION

In a world that often seems like a post-industrial, globalized society of transnationalism and multiculturalism (Bennett et al. 2004), the complexity and changing meaning of acculturation, as well as the varieties of ways individuals experience acculturation, must be recognized. The instrument presented here assesses acculturation along multiple domains in order to capture the complex social-psychological context in which the acculturative process occurs. It is not designed to be used in isolation since a generic instrument to measure levels of acculturation cannot be suitable for every client.

First, indicators should be developed with an understanding of the complexity of the client's world and the necessity of flexible indicators that can be altered to the unique client situation. In-depth research and understanding of a client's multi-faceted, complex context is an important aspect of working with a multicultural client, as is recognition of the client's impact on their environment and the ever-present person-situation dynamic that guides the acculturative process. An instrument that measures acculturation should not presuppose a cultural homeostasis, or view culture as a static or singular concept (Baptiste 1993; Kottak 1999; Ward and Chang 1997).

Second, when administering an instrument like this, practitioners must consider carefully the client's context. They must think creatively about the multiple approaches to measuring acculturation and what can be learned from existing measures and relate models of acculturation to the practice of assessing client levels of acculturation. They must then apply findings with clients to the critical assessment of existing models, and understand which contextual factors may regulate or mediate the dynamic process of acculturation (Bennett, Bennett and Landis 2004; Berry 2003; Cabassa 2003).

Third, the practitioner should be aware of the potential ethnocentricity that may be found in both existing instruments and instruments that the practitioner creates. To this end, the practitioner should consciously

avoid constructing a client's heritage culture as a risk factor. In addition to researching the client's context, the practitioner must do this in a manner that maintains the dignity, value, and uniqueness of the client and his or her experience of both the dominant and his or her heritage culture. Further, in measuring acculturation, the practitioner must be conscious of the risk of viewing the dominant culture's values as universally superior to conflicting values attributed to non-dominant cultures. They must also keep in mind the risk that widespread negative biases and stereotypes pose to his or her construction of measures of acculturation and his or her work with the client (Greenfield 1994; Shelton et al. 2005; Zhou 2001). Finally, given a client's responses to the indicators of acculturation and the critical thought the practitioner has given the client's context, the instrument should frame a conversation with the client regarding his or her acculturative process, acculturative stress, ethnic identity, and other related or unrelated topics.

In social work practice, a practitioner's awareness of a client's level of acculturation enhances the practitioner's cultural competence in interfacing with that client and deepens the practitioner's understanding of how the client experiences her environment. As the practitioner strives for greater cultural competence and a better understanding of the client's world, she is also protecting the client's dignity by demonstrating respect for the client. A practitioner's awareness of acculturation also increases her recognition of the impact of acculturation on other health, psychological, and behavior outcomes and health and social service utilization. A client's level of acculturation impacts social work practice, so a practitioner's awareness of acculturation improves her practice of social work.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dina Drankus is a second-year student at the School of Social Service Administration. She is also a student of the Graduate Program of Health Administration and Policy (GPHAP). She graduated from Northwestern University with a B.A. in economics and mathematical methods in the social sciences. She is currently working for the Ounce of Prevention Fund and HealthConnect One. She serves as a graduate student representative for GPHAP, a co-chair on the Latino Student Association, and on the Associate Board of HealthConnect One. Her interests include infant and maternal health, early childhood education, and community organizing.