

A Study of Acculturation and Adaptation of South Asians in Hong Kong

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Abstract: The study of acculturation has been well-developed in western countries as evinced by the large volume of extensive literature available. However, in reviewing the literature on acculturation studies, it is evident that there is a dearth of information pertaining to the acculturation and adaptation experiences of South Asians in Hong Kong. Cross-cultural studies have increasingly been interested in investigating what happen to people who have grown up in one culture when they move to another cultural environment. Although there are a substantial numbers of South Asian immigrants in Hong Kong, very little is known about their experiences of acculturation and adaptation, the challenges and opportunities they encounter. To better understand their experiences, there is a need to conduct a systematic and comprehensive study. This paper presents an outline and conceptual framework within which to investigate and examine the experiences of acculturation and adaptation of South Asian immigrants in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Acculturation, Psychological Adaptation, Sociocultural Adaptation, Social Support, South Asian, Hong Kong

Introduction

IMMIGRATION IS A worldwide phenomenon and people around the world have been migrating for various reasons, often due to economic reasons, social and political oppressions, and for family reunion. Whatever the reason, migration involved major changes in people's lives such as leaving their country, as well as changes that results from contact with the new culture. These changes can range from physical and environmental changes to change in values, attitudes, and behaviors. They may also encounter various adjustment problems due to language differences, cultural incompatibilities, and negative stereotypes. Berry (1997) employed the concept of *acculturation* to refer to these changes, which occurs at both the group and individual levels. Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936) defined acculturation as the changes that occur when individuals having different culture comes in direct and continuous contact, resulting in mutual influence on each other. Although this definition posit that both cultural groups experienced changes in certain aspects of their systems as a result of the contact, however, in most cases these changes tend to occur more on the part of the non-dominant group.

The study of acculturation has been well-developed in western countries, and there exist a large body of extensive literature regarding the acculturation of immigrants. In the context of Hong Kong, there is a dearth of information on the experiences of cultural adaptation among the South Asians. According to the 2006 Population Census, the ethnic minorities in Hong Kong constituted 5% of the total population (Census and Statistics Department, 2007).

It is therefore not surprising that most of the social services and resources were essentially geared toward serving the Chinese-speaking community (Second Report of the HKSAR, 2005). Although there was an increased influx of people migrating from South and South East Asian countries since the 1990s, not much is known about their adaptation process. The lack of empirical information on the acculturation experiences of South Asians in Hong Kong prevent us from fully understanding how they adapt to the new culture, the challenges and opportunities they encounter.

The South Asians in Hong Kong

The term 'South Asian' is a social construct that has been used to refer to people originating from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Most of the South Asians who had come to the China coast in the early 18th century were mainly from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka but in local parlance they were all referred to as 'Indian' (White, 1994, p. 1) regardless of where they are geographically from. The 'Indians' initially came to the China coast as British subjects and their involvement in trade and other vocations were part of the overall British operation in China and the Far East (Vaid, 1972). After the British gained control over India, it used its vast materials and human resources for the expansion of their empire, which in turn led to large-scale Indian emigration. According to Vaid (1972), there were four main reasons which attributed to the growth of South Asians in different parts of the British colonies during the early days. Firstly, the British recruited many 'Indians' into the military in India and then transported to different parts of the British Empire to work in the military and police forces. Secondly, many 'Indians' were also sent as indentured laborers to work in the Straits Settlements in Southeast Asia. Later, many of these laborers migrated to Hong Kong as sailors or traders. Thirdly, the British also recruited many educated 'Indians' to work as clerks in different parts of her colonies. Their aptitude for English enabled them to be recruited in clerical positions for the colonial government as well as private British trading firms, which in turn enhanced their socioeconomic position in the Colony. After the completion of their contract, many of these civil servants choose to settle in the Colony. Fourthly, there were the 'Indian' traders, merchants and money-lenders, who moved to different parts of the British Empire and made vast fortunes. In time, many of them also migrated to Hong Kong as traders and sailors.

The Nepalese, on the other hand, are relatively 'young' migrant as compared with their other South Asian counterparts. The settlement of the Nepalese in Hong Kong can be traced back to the recruitment of the Gurkha soldiers into the British armies in Hong Kong since 1948 (FEONA, 2000). By virtue of the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, the Gurkha soldiers, their children and Nepalese civilians born in Hong Kong before January 1983 were granted the Right of Abode (ROA). It was only since the early and mid 1990s that the Nepalese began to exercise this right and came to settle in Hong Kong.

Local Studies on South Asians in Hong Kong

As noted, according to the 2006 Population by-Census the ethnic minorities in Hong Kong comprised of 5 % (342 198) of the total population. Amongst these the largest subgroups are the Filipinos (32.9%), followed by Indonesians (25.7%). Given these large numbers, various researchers and scholars have focused their interest on investigating the lives of

Filipina migrant workers (e.g. Constable, 1997, 2007; French, 1986), and to some extent on the Thai and Indonesian migrant workers (e.g. Hewison, 2003; Ng & Lee, 2000; Sim, 2007). These studies have highlighted the plight and condition of migrant workers and the difficulties and constraints faced by them in Hong Kong.

A number of studies have also been conducted by various researchers on the Indian¹ community in Hong Kong. Kwok and Narain's (2003) study of the Indian community in Hong Kong provided a comprehensive history about their diversities, and sociocultural lives. White (1994) also focused her study on the Indian communities in Hong Kong. She had explored and investigated the different regional and religious groups which further provided understand of the historical and cultural background of various Indian ethnic groups in Hong Kong. Plüss (2000) also tackled the issue of transnational identities of Hong Kong Indians in the second half of the 20th century, focusing on the complexity of the phenomenon of Diaspora and the dynamism of the Indian communities in Hong Kong. All these studies have helped to bring out a better understanding of the historical background and cultural lives of the Indian communities as a distinctive group in Hong Kong, as well as in explaining their present situation.

Other local studies on ethnic minorities in Hong Kong have focused on various issues such as employment situations, racial discrimination, and education that have drawn the attention of scholars, concern groups and researchers (e.g. Ku, Chan, & Sandhu, 2005; Chin, 2005; Loper, 2004; Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service, 2002). These studies have helped to raise awareness among scholars and social welfare organizations about issues such as racial discrimination, unequal education and employment opportunities. Racial discrimination has been considered by many researchers and stakeholders as an important barrier to social and labor market inclusion of ethnic minorities. Although findings from these studies have helped to shed light on their predicaments and the difficulties encountered in their everyday life situations, these studies are rather fragmented and do not provide a comprehensive understanding of their acculturation experiences, and the factors that affect or impede their overall adaptation. Systematic research on acculturation and adaptation of South Asians in Hong Kong therefore warrant further examination.

From the above literature review of local studies on South Asians in Hong Kong, it is evident that many researchers and scholars have focused to a large extent on the Indian communities in Hong Kong. Other local studies on ethnic minorities just focus on different issues that are related to education and employment opportunities, discrimination, etc. None of these studies focus specifically on the process of acculturation and adaptation. The present study therefore proposed to focus on two sub-groups of South Asians, that is, Pakistani and Nepalese in Hong Kong.

Acculturation: Definition and Conceptualization

The concept of acculturation has been employed in the social and behavioral sciences, especially among anthropologists and sociologists, for over a century (Olmedo, 1980). Although this concept has been initially used to describe and understand the process of modernization and westernization that many cultures and communities underwent during the 19th and early 20th century (Trimble, 2002), in recent times as international migration, economic globaliz-

¹ The term Indians here refer to people from India.

ation and political conflicts have led to increased migration, the concept of acculturation has also become important to better understand the experiences of ethnic and cultural minorities.

One of the most widely cited definition of acculturation was the one proposed by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, p. 149):

Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which results 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 definition implies that the process of acculturation involved change in both cultural groups due to the mutual influence of intercultural contact. In principle, acculturation is a neutral term that entails change in both cultural groups, but in practice, acculturation tend to induced greater change in the acculturating group than in the dominant group (Berry, 1990a). One reason for this could be the power advantage of dominant groups to impose cultural adaptation on immigrant groups. Within the realm of anthropological studies, the central focus of research has been placed on immigrants groups, while relatively little attention was paid to the pattern and process of change in the individual during the process of culture-contact.

From the social psychological approach, the study of acculturation tended to focused on the internal changes that individual experience during the process of acculturation. Graves (1967) had provided a distinction between group-level and individual-level of acculturation, and coined the term *psychological acculturation* to refer to individual-level of acculturation. Based on Redfield *et al's* (1936) definition of acculturation, Berry (1990b) had defined group-level acculturation as the process of change experience by the group as a result of contact with another culture, while at the individual-level it refer to the process of change the acculturating individual experienced due to contact with another culture and also due to being a participant in the general acculturative changes underway in their own culture. Thus, acculturation at the group-level may refer to the changes in the social structures and cultural practices of the group, while at the individual-level it refer to the change in the psychology of the acculturating individual.

Theories of Acculturation Process

In the acculturation literature, there are two predominant theoretical formulations of acculturation models: the *unidimensional models* (e.g. Gordon, 1964) and *bidimensional models* (e.g. Berry, 1980). The first model conceptualized acculturation as a linear process whereby change in cultural identity is seen to take place along a single continuum over the course of time. This concept posits that the change process is one-way, and the acculturating groups and individuals are thus expected to adopt the host culture at the cost of relinquishing their heritage culture. It also assumed that acculturation process is a zero-sum phenomenon (Cortes, 1994; Cuellar, Arnold & Maldonado, 1995). In other words, it means acculturation process involved giving up one's cultural domain as individual moved towards another cultural domain, and there is no room for the two cultures to exist together within the individual. Over the years, the unidimensional models had been redefined by numerous researchers (e.g. Berry, 1980; Nesdale & Mak, 2000; Sayegh & Lasry, 1993) as they begin to acknowledge

the bi-directional nature of acculturation and a more recent understanding of the construct suggest that acculturation is multifaceted and that true assimilation may never occur.

Theorists who adopt the bidimensional perspective placed emphasis on ethnic pluralism and conceptualized acculturation process as a two-dimensional framework. These two dimensions provide individuals the option to maintain or reject their heritage culture, while also participating and acquiring the values, attitudes and behaviors of the dominant culture. One of the most influential bidimensional models was the one developed by Berry (1974, 1980) which integrates the two dimensions as independent rather than on a single continuum in opposing direction. According to Berry's model, immigrant groups and individuals are confronted with two basic issues during the process of acculturation. The first issue involved asking to what extent they consider it of value to maintain their heritage culture and identity. The second issue involved asking whether they consider it of value to maintain contact and relations with other groups. When these two issues are considered simultaneously a conceptual framework is generated with four acculturation strategies or options available to individual and groups. These are: *integration*, *assimilation*, *separation*, and *marginalization*. It must be noted here that Berry treated these two issues as dichotomous variables for conceptualization purpose, and he does not recognize the continuous nature of these variables, which can also be responded on a continuous scale ranging from positive to negative. Other terms such as *attitudes*, *modes*, *styles*, *options*, *outcomes* and *preferences* have also been used by different researchers and scholars to refer to the way individuals seek to engage in intercultural relations (Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000).

From the point of view of non-dominant groups, *integration* strategy is characterized by strong identification and involvement with their cultural heritage and also with the dominant culture. Individuals who do not wish to maintain their cultural heritage, but prefer only to maintain contact and relations with host members are said to adopt the *assimilation* strategy. When individuals wish to maintain only their heritage culture while rejecting relations with the host members, it is defined as *separation* strategy. *Marginalization* characterizes those individuals who have little possibility or interest to maintain their heritage culture (which often is also due to enforce cultural loss), and maintaining relations with others (often due to discrimination or exclusion) (Berry, 2005).

Berry and colleagues have conducted several empirical studies among different acculturating groups in various countries to assess and validate these acculturation strategies (e.g. Berry, Kim, Power, Young & Bujaki, 1989; Dona & Berry, 2000; Krishnan & Berry, 1992; Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). Most of these studies have shown support for integration mode to be the most adaptive, followed by separation or assimilation, while marginalization is the least favored mode. Integration mode has also been shown to be related to better outcome in terms of psychological well-being and sociocultural adaptation. Studies among ethnic minorities, and in particular among South Asians in western countries have also shown support for integration as the favored mode (Ghuman 1991, 1997, 1999; Robinson 2003). Integration mode can also enable immigrants to maintain aspects of their heritage culture, maintain relations with their own ethnic groups through which they can obtain support and resources, as well as maintain contact with the host group.

Adaptation

Adaptations refer to the relatively stable changes that individual or group make in response to external environmental demands (Berry, 1997, 2006). These adaptations can be short-term or extended over the longer term. The short-term adaptation usually occurs immediately during acculturation, and is sometimes negative and often disruptive in character. The literature on acculturation has shown that most acculturating individuals are usually able to achieve some long-term adaptation to the new cultural context after a period of time (Beiser, et al., 1988; Segall et al., 1990). Adaptation has also been commonly referred to as the level of 'fit' between the individual and the environment (Sam & Berry, 2006). Thus, adaptation may be seen as the 'fit' through which a system is harmonized with the condition of its existence. However, this does not necessarily imply that individual or groups make adjustment by way of assimilation; sometimes it may also involved attempts to change the environment or to move away from it (i.e. by separation). Sometimes a 'fit' might be achieved between the acculturating individual and the new environment, while at other times, a 'fit' might not be achieved resulting from incompatible behavior between the two cultures, which can lead to varying degree of acculturative stress (Berry & Sam, 1997).

In recent literature on psychological acculturation, Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a; Ward, 1996) have proposed and validated two distinct variables of adaptation, namely, *psychological adaptation* and *sociocultural adaptation*. Although empirically related, these two forms of adaptation are conceptually distinct and are predicted by different types of variables and the dimension of adjustment follow different patterns over time (Armes & Ward, 1989; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b; Stone Feinstein & Ward, 1990). For instance, it is observed that psychological problems tend to increase soon after contact and then gradually decrease over the course of time. Sociocultural adaptation on the other hand, tends to follow a linear improvement over time (Ward, 1996).

Psychological adaptation is based on affective responses, and refer to psychological and physical well-being (Schmitz, 1992), positive sense of personal and cultural identity, life satisfaction and good mental health (Sam & Berry, 2006). It has been commonly assessed with measures of self-esteem (e.g. Grossman, Wirt, & Davids, 1985) and psychological adjustment, including checklist to measure anxiety, depression and psychosomatic symptoms (Ryder, Alden & Paulhus, 2000). Ward and colleagues have demonstrated that psychological adaptation is also affected by personality factors, life changes, and social support (Searle & Ward, 1990; Stone-Feinstein & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992).

Sociocultural adaptation is defined in terms of behavioral competence (Ward, 2001) and closely linked to the social skills paradigm popularized by Furnham and Bochner (1986) in their culture learning approach to cross-cultural transition. According to the culture learning perspective greater emphasis is placed on the role of learning culture-specific skills that are required in order to adapt to the new cultural environment. Sociocultural adaptation thus refers to individual's ability to manage or negotiate effective interactions in the new cultural milieu, especially in the areas of family life, work and school. It is usually measured in terms of individuals' difficulty to perform daily tasks such as making friends, participating in social activities, language skill, and ability to manage everyday-life issues (Berry & Sam, 1997; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Findings from empirical studies conducted by Ward and colleagues have shown that sociocultural adjustment is predicted by different sets of variables.

For instance, length of residence in the new culture is seen to be one of the most important factors of successful sociocultural adjustment; others include resources such as higher education and income (Ataca, 1996), amount of contact with host nationals, and general cultural knowledge (Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a). Thus, analysis of the factors that affect adaptation revealed that psychological adaptation is predicted by personality variables, life changing events and social support, while sociocultural adaptation is predicted by cultural knowledge, degree of contact, and intergroup attitudes.

A Framework for the Study of Acculturation and Adaptation of South Asian in Hong Kong

This section provides a framework for the study of acculturation experiences and adaptation of South Asians in Hong Kong. As discussed above, during cross-cultural transition, immigrants may experience various changes in their lives as they strived to established themselves and adjust in the new cultural environment. These changes entail making various adjustments such as learning new ways of interaction and communication, adapting to new social structures, establishing new goals, etc. The nature and extent to which these changes are absorbed or embraced by the acculturating individual will also depend to a large extent on the action of the individual as well as contextual factors. These include demographic factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, educational level and experiences of discrimination. Various studies and research on acculturation among immigrants have also found that these factors are seen to affect and moderate the relations between acculturation experiences and the outcome of acculturation. In addition, during the process of acculturation they may also face certain stresses that are related to their acculturation experiences which may be compounded with other experiences such as discrimination. All these factors may have a direct or indirect influence on their attitudes towards how they wish to live following contact, which in turn can affect their overall adaptation. Although the primary impetus for most immigrants to leave their country may be due to various reasons such as for economic improvement, family reunion, etc., the psychological factors also play an important role in determining how well they adapt in the new country. Therefore, it is also important to focus on the individual-level phenomenon which can serve to expound the means by which individuals achieve internal positive affect and psychological well-being across cultural contacts.

To understand and examine the acculturation process and the overall adaptation of South Asians in Hong Kong, the study will seek to explore their (i) acculturation experiences; (ii) acculturation strategies; and (iii) overall adaptation. Acculturation experiences will be conceptualized in terms of host language proficiency, social contact, experiences of discrimination and level of acculturative stress. Acculturation strategies will be based on Berry's fourfold model of acculturation strategies. Adaptation, as proposed by Ward and colleagues, will be examined in terms of psychological well-being and sociocultural competence in their everyday life situation. In addition, demographic variables and the role of social support will also be examined in greater detail. The role of social support is an important variable as various studies have shown that the presence of social support can help to buffer against acculturative stress.

Summary

This paper provides a literature review on acculturation, its concept and definition, and a framework for the study of acculturation experiences among South Asians in Hong Kong. Although the study of acculturation has been well-developed and widely discussed in the western context, there are very limited empirical studies in this area in the context of Hong Kong. Systematic research on acculturation and adaptation of South Asians in Hong Kong can provide a better understanding of their experiences of the process, which in turn can help to provide implications for government policies and service providers. The study of acculturation is a complex area of research in cross-cultural studies that involve the process of more than one culture. The process of acculturation is also highly variable and depends on various factors. It must be noted here that not all individual will participate to the same degree in the acculturation process nor share the same goals. Therefore, in studies of acculturation it is also important to focus on the variation among individuals in the group that is undergoing acculturation.

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Kareen N. Tonsing is a registered social worker, and currently pursuing her doctorate degree at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interest lies in cross-cultural studies, social policy, acculturation and adaptation. Having worked with people from diverse backgrounds, Kareen is interested in studying cross-cultural relations, and to understand how immigrants adjust to living in a new country, the factors that hinder or impede in their adjustment process, and the challenges and opportunities they encounter in the process. Her present research focuses on the acculturation and adaptation of South Asians in Hong Kong.

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