

**Acculturation Processes of US-Born Asian American Adolescents: An
Ecological Systems Theory Approach**

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Abstract

This literature review critically examines the acculturation processes of US-born Asian American adolescents through the framework of Ecological Systems Theory, highlighting how various environmental layers—from immediate family interactions to broader societal influences—affect their identity development and experiences of racial discrimination. The study reveals that family, schools, and peer groups significantly shape acculturation, often leading to conflicts due to differing cultural norms. Societal attitudes and media portrayals, including stereotypes like the "model minority" myth, further complicate identity formation. Temporal changes and historical contexts, such as immigration policies, also play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' sense of belonging. The findings underscore the need for targeted mental health interventions and ongoing research to support the social integration and well-being of Asian American youths, emphasizing the importance of understanding these dynamics for fostering intercultural understanding and social cohesion in a diverse society.

Key words: Acculturation, Asian American, Adolescents, Ecological Systems Theory, Identity Development, Racial Discrimination, Generational Differences, Microsystem, Mesosystem

Thesis

This literature review critically examines the acculturation processes of US-born Asian American adolescents through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory, analyzing how different environmental layers—from immediate micro dynamics to broader societal interactions—influence their identity development and experiences of racial discrimination.

Introduction

The processes of racial and ethnic socialization profoundly influence the formation of identity within Asian American communities. These processes encompass the transmission of cultural values, practices, and norms from generation to generation, shaped significantly by the unique historical and socio-cultural contexts of immigration and minority status in the United States. As Asian Americans navigate the complexities of integrating their familial heritage with the broader American culture, the pace and nature of their acculturation vary markedly between generations (Zhou & Bankston, 2016). Understanding these variations is needed not only for comprehending the individual and collective identities that emerge within Asian American families but also for appreciating the broader implications for social cohesion and intercultural interaction within American society.

Adding to this complexity, the role of technology and media has emerged as a pivotal influence on acculturation, particularly among adolescents. Studies such as those by Charmaraman et al (2018) illustrate how digital media platforms can both challenge and reinforce cultural norms, impacting the racial and ethnic socialization of young Asian Americans. These platforms can serve as a double-edged sword, offering spaces for cultural

expression and community building while also exposing youth to potential racial stereotypes and discrimination.

Racial and ethnic socialization in Asian American families involves communicating about race and ethnicity both implicitly, through cultural practices and daily interactions, and explicitly, through direct conversations about racial realities and strategies for dealing with them.

These processes are deeply entwined with migration experiences and the ongoing negotiation between maintaining a connection to one's cultural roots and adapting to a new cultural environment. For many Asian American families, this negotiation results in a dynamic, sometimes contentious, interplay of cultural preservation and transformation.

Understanding generational differences in acculturation and socialization within Asian American families is essential for several reasons. It highlights the adaptive challenges and resilience mechanisms that characterize the immigrant experience and its transmission to subsequent generations. It also provides insights into the changing dynamics of identity formation across generations, revealing how shifts in cultural, social, and political contexts influence individual and collective self-understandings. Furthermore, understanding these differences aids in addressing potential intergenerational conflicts that can arise from mismatched expectations and values between immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children.

Acculturation—the process of cultural change and psychological adaptation that occurs when individuals from different cultures come into direct continuous contact—plays a central role in how racial and ethnic socialization is experienced and enacted. For Asian American families, where parents and children may represent different acculturative generations, divergent acculturation pathways can lead to distinct socialization practices and identity outcomes. These

pathways influence personal identity and self-esteem and the familial and social relationships that support psychological and social well-being (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Berry's (1997) acculturation framework suggests that individuals engage with their new cultural environment through one of four strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization. This framework posits that first-generation immigrants often favor separation, maintaining their original cultural identity over blending with the host culture, largely due to entrenched cultural ties and values shaped before migration.

Conversely, second-generation immigrants typically favor integration or assimilation, driven by their upbringing in the host country, which offers them dual cultural exposure from a very young age. This exposure often results in a quicker and more profound acculturation process than their parents, who may experience cultural integration more slowly. This generational discrepancy highlights the need for targeted mental health interventions, as studies like those by Yoon, Langrehr, and Ong (2011) have shown that such discrepancies can significantly impact mental health, leading to increased anxiety and depression among adolescents.

Applied Ecological Systems Theory: Acculturation and Identity

Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how different environmental contexts influence individual development. This theory is particularly pertinent to the study of acculturation among Asian American immigrants as it elucidates the complex interplay between various environmental systems from the microsystem to the macro system.

Microsystem

A microsystem encompasses the immediate environments; in this context, the concept of microsystems is defined as where individuals engage directly and frequently, such as family, schools, and peer groups.

The family is often a primary microsystem for Asian American adolescents, serving as the foundational environment where cultural values, traditions, and expectations are first introduced and reinforced. Within this microsystem, behaviors, and roles are deeply rooted in heritage and familial expectations. The family environment usually emphasizes values such as respect for elders, educational achievement, and adherence to cultural norms. These familial expectations set a framework within which adolescents must navigate their identity and social roles, often contrasting sharply with the norms they encounter in other microsystems like schools and peer groups (Choi, 2021).

Schools represent pivotal yet distinct microsystems where Asian American adolescents spend significant time, mainly as they grow older. Schools typically align more closely with mainstream American cultural norms and values, exposing students to behavioral expectations such as individualism, competition, and social conformity to peer norms.

Peer groups, on the other hand, form a separate and highly influential microsystem. Here, Asian American adolescents often encounter the most direct pressure to adjust their behaviors and appearances to fit in. These groups are essential for social interaction and identity exploration, offering a platform for adolescents to experiment with roles. The incentive to gain popularity and acceptance within these groups can be powerful (Hahm, 2004) (Qin, 2009).

These microenvironments play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' acculturation processes; however, each microenvironment does not exist in isolation.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem plays a crucial role in the acculturation of Asian American adolescents by encapsulating the interactions between various microsystems such as family, schools, and peer groups. In school settings, Asian American students often encounter cultural norms that differ markedly from those at home. These daily interactions can accelerate assimilation into mainstream "American" culture, especially compared to their parents, who might have more limited direct engagement with these environments (Qin, 2009). This rapid assimilation can sometimes lead to conflicts at home, where traditional values may emphasize different aspects of identity and behavior. For instance, the emphasis on individual achievement and independence in schools may clash with the values of familial interdependence and collective responsibility prevalent in many Asian cultures.

Additionally, peer groups within these educational settings play a significant role in this environmental level of acculturation, either by supporting integration or providing experiences of exclusion or discrimination. These interactions can profoundly influence Asian American youths, often subjecting them to the perpetual foreigner stereotype, where they are seen as eternal outsiders. Questions like 'Where are you from?' or comments such as 'You speak good English' (Sue et al., 2007) alienate their sense of identity and belonging. This can make the development of a stable, integrated identity even more challenging. Research by Kiang, Perreira, and Fuligni (2011) underlines that peer relationships are pivotal in shaping the ethnic identity and

self-concept of Asian American adolescents. The risk of not fitting into mainstream school environments often exposes Asian American adolescents to bullying and explicit forms of racism (Qin, 2009). This can manifest as both physical and emotional abuse, exacerbating the stress of navigating between different cultural worlds (Chen & Uttal, 2015).

On the other hand, achieving popularity in school can offer significant benefits. It can act as a protective buffer against bullying and enhance social integration, making it easier for these adolescents to navigate social hierarchies and potentially reducing their exposure to negative racial interactions. However, pursuing popularity may also pressure them to conform to mainstream norms that conflict with their cultural values, thus complicating their identity conflicts (Qin, 2009).

The mesosystem, including the interactions between school experiences and family life, often becomes a battleground of conflicting values and expectations. Asian American adolescents may grapple with the differing expectations of independence promoted at school and the familial interdependence cherished at home (Yoon et al., 2011). These mesosystem conflicts are particularly challenging as they intensify the acculturation stress experienced by adolescents.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is one of the layers in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, referring to the broadest context within an individual's life. It encompasses the overarching cultural norms, values, laws, and customs of a society that indirectly influences an individual's development. These can include societal attitudes, cultural ideologies, legal frameworks, and

prevailing social conditions that collectively impact the microsystems and mesosystems of an individual.

The media's role within the macrosystem is particularly potent, serving as both a mirror and a mold for cultural identity, influencing the interactions in microsystems. Media portrayals like the "model minority" myth profoundly affect the acculturation process and identity formation of Asian American youths. Research by Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) and Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2015) shows how these stereotypes shape expectations within family and educational settings, pressuring individuals to conform to narrow societal norms. Media portrayals of Asian Americans not only reflect societal values but also actively shape them, contributing to a cyclic reinforcement of stereotypes that influence public attitudes and policies. These representations can affect legislative attitudes toward immigration and civil rights, directly impacting acculturation. For example, legislative changes influenced by public and media attitudes can alter the social landscape, affecting everything from immigration policy to racial profiling (Croucher et al., 2020).

Chronosystem

Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem, emphasizing the dimension of time, provides a valuable perspective for understanding the evolving sense of belonging among US-born Asian American adolescents. This aspect of Ecological Systems Theory highlights how temporal changes and socio-historical contexts have lasting effects that shape an individual's development. Historical immigration policies such as the Immigration Act of 1924, which severely restricted immigration from Asia, have had long-lasting effects on the Asian American community by altering

community structures and reinforcing racial stigmatization. These legislative actions impacted the immigrants of that era and set a precedent that influenced the social dynamics and identities of subsequent generations. The restrictions limited cultural reinforcements from new immigrants, affecting cultural retention and the formation of a stable ethnic identity. As a result, US-born Asian American adolescents often navigate complex identity landscapes, balancing their cultural heritage with the pressures of assimilation. This balancing act can affect their sense of belonging, as they may feel neither fully integrated into mainstream American culture nor entirely connected to their ancestral roots, leading to challenges in forming a cohesive identity and a sense of community.

Changes in public attitudes towards Asian Americans also play a pivotal role in shaping the identity development of Asian American adolescents. For instance, during periods of economic downturn or international conflict, Asian Americans have often been unjustly targeted as scapegoats, which was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when individuals of Asian descent faced increased discrimination and violence (Misra et al., 2020). These shifts in public sentiment can lead to heightened awareness among Asian American adolescents of their racial identity and may foster a sense of otherness. On the other hand, positive shifts, such as the growing acceptance and celebration of Asian cultures seen through the popularity of Asian media in mainstream American culture, can enhance feelings of pride and belonging among Asian American youth.

Research literature offers various examples of how these historical and temporal factors influence Asian American identity development. For instance, studies have shown that historical discrimination has led to a form of collective racial trauma within some Asian American communities, impacting mental health and social behavior (Chae et al., 2008). Additionally,

research on the model minority stereotype, which emerged during the civil rights movements to position Asian Americans as a successful minority group, illustrates how shifting narratives can impact self-perception and external expectations (Lee & Zhou, 2015).

Manifestations of the Acculturation Gap

One of the most evident manifestations of the acculturation gap is the difference in communication styles and language proficiency. While immigrant parents often maintain proficiency in their native language, their children typically develop greater fluency in English, the dominant language of their social and educational environments. This linguistic divide can lead to misunderstandings and a lack of emotional intimacy as parents and children struggle to find a common language to effectively express complex emotions and concepts. This dynamic can lead to what is known as "language brokering," where children translate or interpret language and cultural meanings for their parents, reversing traditional parent-child roles (Costigan & Dokis, 2006).

Cultural values regarding independence, collectivism, education, and familial obligations often differ markedly between generations. Asian cultural norms that emphasize respect for authority, interdependence, and family loyalty can clash with the more individualistic values encouraged in Western societies. Younger generations might prioritize personal achievement and autonomy more than familial duty, leading to disagreements over career choices, educational goals, and even day-to-day decisions like social activities or dress codes (Juang & Alvarez, 2010).

Social behaviors, including manners of socializing, friendship patterns, and leisure activities, also reflect the acculturation gap. Second-generation youths often adopt the social norms of the broader American culture, which can differ significantly from those of their parents' native culture. This adoption can lead to conflicts over social expectations, such as dating, marriage, and even the appropriate age for certain milestones like obtaining a driver's license or having a first job (Clemons, 2019).

The psychological impacts of the acculturation gap are described as profound and multifaceted within related literature. Studies have shown that higher levels of family acculturation discrepancies are associated with greater family conflict, which in turn is linked to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues among second-generation youths. Parents, too, can experience stress and feelings of alienation or loss as they perceive their children drifting culturally away from them. This dynamic can exacerbate the risk of generational isolation within the family (Ying & Han, 2008).

The acculturation gap also affects educational aspirations and achievements. Immigrant parents often have high educational expectations for their children, viewing education as a key pathway to success in the host country. However, these expectations can sometimes add an immense amount of pressure on the children, particularly if they are struggling with balancing their parents' expectations with their own interests or with the realities of navigating a different educational system (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Misunderstandings about the educational system and its opportunities can further complicate this dynamic, leading to frustration on both sides.

Finally, the acculturation gap influences individual identity formation. Young Asian Americans often navigate complex identity landscapes, balancing the ethnic identity tied to their parents' culture with a personal and social identity that is influenced heavily by American

culture. This balancing act can sometimes lead to internal conflicts about "authenticity" and belonging, neither feeling fully anchored in either culture (Tadmor et al., 2009).

Future Directions

Future research in the field of acculturation among US-born Asian American adolescents should consider several pivotal directions to enhance our understanding of this complex process. Longitudinal studies are essential for tracking the long-term effects of acculturation across different stages of development. Such studies could provide valuable insights into the changing dynamics of cultural integration as adolescents transition into adulthood, capturing how early experiences shape later outcomes regarding identity, mental health, and social integration.

Another crucial area of focus should be the impact of digital technology, particularly the age at which individuals begin using smartphones and other devices, on the rate of acculturation. Research could explore how these technologies facilitate or hinder the maintenance of cultural heritage, especially in how they influence social interactions, access to culturally relevant content, and exposure to mainstream media. This is particularly relevant given the increasing pervasiveness of digital media in the lives of adolescents and its potential to alter traditional pathways of cultural transmission and identity formation significantly.

It would be beneficial to examine how these factors operate within specific ecological contexts, such as in families with transracial adoptees. Understanding these family structures' unique challenges and opportunities could shed light on broader acculturation

processes. Research in this area could focus on how transracial adoptees navigate their identity development within the dual contexts of their adoptive culture and their ethnic heritage. This would involve studying the microsystem, such as the immediate family environment and peer interactions, and the macrosystem, including societal attitudes and media portrayals that influence perceptions of race and identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review has provided a comprehensive analysis of the acculturation processes experienced by US-born Asian American adolescents through the framework of Ecological Systems Theory. By exploring the various environmental layers, from the immediate microsystem of family and peer interactions to the broader macrosystem influences like media and societal attitudes, this study elucidates the complex and multifaceted nature of identity development and experiences of racial discrimination among these adolescents. The findings highlight the significant impact of generational differences in acculturation, the pivotal role of digital technology, and the profound effects of the acculturation gap on family dynamics and individual well-being. These insights underscore the need for targeted interventions and continued research to support better the mental health and social integration of Asian American youths as they navigate their unique cultural landscapes. Understanding these dynamics contributes to academic knowledge and informs practical strategies for fostering intercultural understanding and social cohesion in an increasingly diverse society.

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