Acculturation of Children in the United States: The Explicit Reference to Theory within Empirical Research*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the explicit reference to theory in published empirical studies on child acculturation and schooling within the United States. By using a computerized database search of peer-reviewed publications, the researchers found and examined twenty-five studies of student acculturation. Findings of this analysis indicated that seventy-two percent of the empirically based studies explicitly referenced theory. The most common theories explicitly referenced within the studies include Berry’s acculturation theory (1993, 1997, or 2003) and Bronfenbrenner's human ecological framework (1979). The authors addressed concerns about whether or not, as well as how, authors explicitly referenced theory within publications. A discussion of the benefits of explicitly referencing theory with implications for future research follows.

Keywords: child acculturation theory, use of theory, explicit use of theory, usefulness of theory

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Acculturation refers to the attainment of a new culture different from one’s own. This includes both an individual’s attainment of a new culture, as in the case of an immigrant adopting a new country’s culture, as well as the attainment of another society’s culture by a social group (Bolaffi, 2003). The first refers to an individual level of acculturation while the latter refers to acculturation at the level of the social group level. Scholars investigated two main types of acculturation: reciprocal and asymmetric (see Beiser, Dion, Gotowiec, Hyman, & Vu, 1995; Lebedeva & Tatarko, 2013; Sluzki, 1979). Reciprocal acculturation occurs when there is a bi-directional exchange of cultural traits between two cultures that result in cultural changes in each culture. Unlike reciprocal acculturation that involves mutual cultural exchanges, in asymmetric acculturation the ‘inferior’ culture adapts the cultural traits of the dominant culture (Bolaffi, 2003).

The United States’ population will likely experience an increase in migration from foreign countries over the next four decades (Ortman & Guarneri, 2009). Indeed, as of 2010, fully one third of the foreign-born population migrated to the United States within the last decade (Grieco et al., 2012). In that year, the foreign-born population was typically younger (i.e., half were between the ages of 18 and 44 compared to one third of the native-born population) and more likely to have given birth in the previous twelve months (Grieco et al., 2012). These statistics, combined with the fact that the foreign-born are more likely than native-born to live in poverty, suggest that schools over the next several decades will face the increasing challenge of addressing the connection between immigration, poverty, and education. As the schools evolve and reflect the increasing diversity of students, a disproportionate number of whom will live at or near the poverty level, it will be increasingly important that researchers, policymakers, and educators have a better understanding of the mechanisms and effects of acculturation.

Flores, Ojeda, Yu-Ping, Gee, and Lee, (2006) note that American schools within the United States reflect White American values. As a result, an increasing number of minority students must contend with acculturation issues as they progress through their educational career in the schools. Acculturation can affect students’ academic success (Buening & Tollefson, 1987; Ramos & Sánchez, 1995; Sakamoto & Xie, 2006), educational persistence (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004; Flores et al., 2006), health (Black & Markides 1993; Landrine, Richardson, Klonoff, & Flay, 1994; Unger et al. 2000), second language acquisition (Schumann, 1986), and the tendency toward violent behavior (Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004). Clearly, as the minority population in the United States continues to grow it is becoming increasingly important to understand how acculturation, pedagogy, and school environments interact to support or undermine one’s education.

While research over the last two decades has increasingly focused on the issues of acculturation within the school environment for minority students, the theoretical grounding for

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1As discussed in the method section, theory in this study included other similar terms such as perspective, model, theoretical framework, view, and hypothesis.
such research varies widely. As this literature base grows, it is important for researchers to understand how theory informs such studies. Theory provides an explanation that relates to ‘fact’ or ‘data’ (Homans, 1964) and offers guidance for practice (Johnson-Odim, 2001). While an author may make explicit reference to theory within a publication, how that author actually employs the theory, is important. The use of theory within research provides an organized, systematic way of making sense of the data while providing researchers a vehicle to examine and improve their hypotheses. Further, theory is an important part of making predictions about the future (Klein & White, 1996). Finally, the use of theory in an explicit way helps readers to perceive the study from a broader perspective and makes it easier for them to assess the basis of a study’s design (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

A majority of researchers recognize the importance of employing theory within research as a way of understanding how variables affect outcome. The use of theory provides a way to position and communicate the state of a field of study to spur ongoing research in an organized manner. Karl Popper’s (1982) perception of theories provides us with a better understanding of their function. He stated that scientific theories are “nets” to catch the reality of our world. Using this metaphor, just as a better net will catch more of what one seeks, a better theory will account for more of the real world. By testing various theories and eliminating those that explain less of our reality, “we may succeed in improving our theories … in making nets which are better and better adapted to catch our fish, the real world” (Popper, 1982, p.42).

As school acculturation takes on increasing importance in addressing issues of race, ethnicity, and poverty in the United States, it is paramount that researchers ground their work in theory to evolve our phenomenological understandings and further refine theoretical models.

This research sought to analyze the United States’ school-based acculturation literature to determine the extent to which theory informed empirical research explicitly. Research questions guiding this study were as follows:

(1) How many published studies were empirical in nature?

(2) Of the published empirical studies how many explicitly referenced theory?

(3) If reference to a theory occurred in a publication, did that reference occur in the abstract?

Methods

In this quantitative study, each author independently conducted a general computerized search followed by more specific searches utilizing several databases (e.g., JSTOR, PsychInfo, Social Science Abstract, and Sociological Abstracts) to find published journal articles with the keywords ‘acculturation’ and ‘school” within the title. The following criteria guided the selection of articles for review and analysis:

(1) Only original, peer reviewed journal articles comprised the focus of the study. The study did not examine meta-analyses and literature reviews.
Studies selected contained both ‘acculturation’ and ‘school’ in their titles (to eliminate those not primarily focused on the acculturation of children in schools).

The study reviewed only articles related to acculturation in schools in the United States.

The authors compared their search results and produced a master list of articles to represent the overall dataset.

Each author independently reviewed each of the articles within the dataset to determine (a) how many articles explicitly referenced theory as a part of empirical research, (b) the identification of the theory discussed in the article, and (c) where in the article the use of theory occurred. If a paper used the term ‘theory’ or other similar terms (such as perspective, model, theoretical framework, view, and hypothesis) to present research questions, to explain the topic examined, or to interpret research findings, it was coded as ‘theory’ for the purposes of this analysis. In this way, an inclusive investigation of the use of ‘theory’ in empirical studies occurred as much as possible (Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001). Following the independent analysis of each article, the authors compared their results and discussed any disagreements to arrive at the results. The use of Cohen’s (1960) kappa coefficient provided an assessment of inter-rater reliability.

Results

The researchers agreed on 25 studies (see Appendix 1 for the list of the studies examined in this research). Each investigator then independently examined the articles to determine which explicitly discussed theory in conjunction with empirical research. The initial inter-rater reliability, determined by computing Cohen’s (1960) kappa coefficient, was 0.64 (considered as substantial agreement according to Landis & Koch, 1977). After discussing the initial results, complete agreement was reached (Cohen’s kappa = 1).

Overall results showed that seventy-two percent of the studies (18 out of 25) explicitly referenced theory while twenty-eight percent of the studies (7 out of 25) did not. While none of the studies explicitly referenced a theory within the abstract, 17 referenced theory in the introduction, with ten of those referencing theory within the discussion as well. Of the eighteen that referenced theory as a part of an empirical study, one referenced theory only within the discussion/conclusion section of the study (see Table 1). A wide variety of theories appeared in the empirical literature (see Footnote 1), but of these Berry’s acculturation model (Berry, 1993, 1997, 2003) and Bronfenbrenner’s human ecological framework (1979) occurred most often, but only in 16% and 12% of the articles respectively.
Table 1
Location of the Theory Referenced within Empirical Studies of School Acculturation in the U. S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Section</th>
<th>Number of times</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion/Conclusion</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract only</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction only</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Results only</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion/Conclusion only</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract, Introduction, Results, and Discussion</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction, Results, and Discussion</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction and Discussion</td>
<td>10</td>
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**Discussion**

It is important to note that almost three-quarters of the empirical studies on school acculturation in the United States examined in this research explicitly referenced theory. The most commonly used theories were Berry’s (1993, 1997, 2003) acculturation framework and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) human ecological framework.

While overtly referencing theory is a common practice, there are several issues to consider (see Keskin, 2006; 2013 and Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001 for similar concerns). First, none of the articles referencing theory did so in the abstract of the study. The authors of the present study contend that it is important to mention the theory within the abstract of the study because it is typically the most easily visible and widely accessible part of a publication. That is, while the full texts of most articles may not be readily available, most abstracts (if not all) are usually accessible. If a researcher were trying to analyze the research literature within a specific genre (in this case, school acculturation in the United States) as it relates to a specific theory, it would be easier to locate the relevant publications when reference to theory occurs in the abstract. Additionally, the explicit use of theory within the abstract of an article would also make it easier for researchers to survey the existing literature for the most common theories employed within a particular genre. This might be of particular interest when one is trying to determine the theoretical evolution or dominant paradigm of a specific field of study over time.

When employing a theory, it is important to explicitly state its use early in the paper (i.e., within the introduction or methods section) rather than later (i.e., in the discussion section). Contextualizing a study within a particular theoretical framework early in the article helps the
reader to better interpret the study’s foundation and subsequent findings. Further, early understanding of the theoretical underpinnings may provide better guidance to the reader in the process of developing further research within that genre.

Another issue related to the explicit reference of theory that deserves attention is that of proper citation. In some publications examined in this study, the authors mentioned theory but without a reference or explanation. In such cases, it is difficult to find out more about the theory or make judgments about how it contributed to the research in question. Not providing a clear indication of the theoretical foundation of a study generates ambiguity for the reader. Related to this is the inconsistency in how authors reference a given theory. For instance, while the terms ‘model’ and ‘theory’ actually refer to two different concepts, their use throughout the literature while referring to a single theoretical framework was arbitrary. In addition, the analysis revealed that while several studies explicitly referenced a particular theory, the actual use of that theory was ambiguous at best. For instance, Maldonado, Kushner, Barr, and Korz (2009) explicitly referenced Phinney’s model (1992) without clearly connecting it to their study’s framework or results.

The educational importance of this current study is that it calls researchers’ attention to an important issue in the literature: explicitly and clearly referencing theory. Without such attention to detail, the today’s research literature may unnecessarily create further ambiguity within genres, such as school acculturation, that are nuanced and multifaceted in nature. The authors suggest that future researchers explicitly and clearly refer to their use of applicable theory when investigating school acculturation in the United States. This will enhance the ability of authors to improve the ‘nets’ used to capture data related to school acculturation. As a result, policymakers and practitioners will be in a much better position to know when and how to apply research findings to practice.

References


Appendix


