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Identity and acculturation: The case for Africa

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Despite the multicultural nature of African societies, there is still very little knowledge about acculturation and its association with identity on this continent. Acculturation processes and outcomes are strongly associated with identity. The objective of this article is to relate different models of acculturation (unidimensional, bi-dimensional, multidimensional) with the tri-dimensional model of identity (personal, relational, and social). Social identity components, such as ethnicity, religion, and culture, suggest a need for modification of Western models of acculturation to embrace the multifaceted realities of non-Western multicultural societies. The social complexity and the continuous transition within African societies provides unique opportunities to examine and further develop the multidimensional acculturation models to take into account the social complexity which informs identity issues both within and across different African nations.

Keywords: personal identity, relational identity, social identity, acculturation outcomes, acculturation process, Africa

Introduction

With over 1.2 billion people across 58 countries and between 1 200 and 3 000 ethnolinguistic groups; Africa is one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world. Alongside the diversity, Africa is also regarded as politically the most unstable continent, marred by poverty and ethnic strife (Adams & Abubakar, 2016). On the upside, Africa also harbours some emerging and relatively fast-growing economies, which has led to greater participation in both regional and global economic markets (Rodrik, 2016). Despite this fast-growing economic development, socio-political aspects still remain a big concern for African states. One of the major challenges faced by these nations is how to unravel the richness associated with ethnic diversity and to build a national identity inclusive of all people.

In this article, we consider the importance of identity and acculturation in (culturally diverse) Africa. We seek to propose a model of acculturation in which personal, relational, and social dimensions of identity (Adams & Van de Vijver, 2015) interface with prevalent models of acculturation premised on unidimensional, bi-dimensional, and multidimensional acculturation (Van de Vijver, 2015). From these analyses, we derive a theoretical basis for studying the intersectionality of these constructs within transitional African societies. We start the article by defining identity on three broad dimensions: personal, relational, and social identity. We then discuss acculturation and incorporate the three identity dimensions proposing a modified acculturation model. Finally, we discuss options for identity and acculturation research in the African context.

Identity and its tri-dimensionality

Identity is that which makes individuals either similar to other people or different from them (Munday, 2006). It contains different aspects of who the individual is; from biological sex, psychological processes, or demographic makeup, to the social positions held by the

individual (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). It is the individual's search for personal meaning in relation to his/her place within the larger social context in which he/she finds him/herself (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, & Martin, 2001; Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006). Identity is both stable and unchanging in the case of race, ethnicity, or biological gender; or fluid and dynamic as in the case of nationality, religion, psychological gender, or employment (Oostendorp & Jones, 2015). The complexity associated with identity allows people to draw from personal values, goals, aspirations, relationships, roles, multiple affiliations, and group memberships in a quest to define themselves (Adams, 2014). It is as much contextual as it is personal, as the environment influences and shapes identity development. Identity comprises three dimensions: personal identity, relational identity, and social identity; each of which has many components. There is little empirical research on how these aspects are related (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009).

Personal identity

Personal identity considers the intrapersonal negotiation of a meaningful sense of self. It is the preservation of the consciousness that accounts for the person's past, present, and future selves (cf. Winkler, 1991). It accounts for individuals' need to develop their self-identity, an idea of themselves; which, although situated within relational and social spaces (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Schwartz et al., 2011), is determined by them for them. Personal identity emphasises individual autonomy, personal needs, values, goals, and aspirations (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Schwartz et al., 2011; Rodriguez, Schwartz, & Whitebourne, 2010). It is what makes the individual unique.

Personal identity is a form of ego identity, based on the experienced self-continuity and self-coherence an individual experiences throughout the life span; personal identity defines who the 'self' is (Crocetti, Sica, Schwartz, Serafini, & Meeus, 2013; Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2000).

In their quest to find themselves, individuals may result with one of four outcomes: identity achievement (where individuals engage in both a high degree of exploration and commitment); identity moratorium (where individuals engage in much exploration without really committing); identity foreclosure (where individuals commit without exploring alternatives); and identity diffusion (where individuals neither explore nor commit) (Marcia, 1980).

Relational identity

Relational identity is the sense of coherence and continuity individuals derive from interpersonal relations (Stets & Burke, 2000). Relationships are important for how individuals define themselves as these provide them with the respective roles that give a sense of meaning to their lives. Essentially, identity is the shared social meanings people attribute to themselves in a role (whether as a parent, medical doctor, or friend). Relational identity is defined as the relationship between an individual's roles and the interactions with individuals based on those roles. Here individuals define themselves at an interpersonal level within the roles negotiated and legitimised by other people (Schwartz et al., 2011).

Relational identity is both social and active as enacted through interpersonal interaction (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Social relational identity is defined by roles that are socially negotiated (such as fatherhood – one may fulfil the role of father if one has fathered a child or there are others who acknowledges one's role as father within their lives). Active relational identity are roles that are legally and formally established (as in the case of a medical doctor – one may only be a doctor once one has completed the relevant medical studies, internship and residence; and practices as a doctor only if others acknowledge one's status as doctor) (Adams & Van de Vijver, 2015; Andersen & Chen, 2002). Who one is, or considers oneself to be, is negotiated with others (Schwartz et al., 2011).

Social identity

Social identity is defined by the way individuals manage their interpersonal roles within social groups (Bornman, 2010). Members of social groups share similar values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, rituals, and goals; which contribute towards the individual's personal identity (Jenkins, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011). Social group membership promotes a sense of belonging and a sense of emotional attachment to something greater than the self (Phinney, 2000). This is in part because shared membership of that group, as well as the salience and identification with that group; contributes to how individuals define themselves within that group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The result is that people cognitively place themselves into a particular group of people with whom they share similarities (in-groups), and distinguishing them as a group from others who they consider different from themselves (out-groups). Thus, social identity provides individuals with the social categories that allow people to distinguish their groups from other groups based on shared values, norms, and behaviours.

Consequences of a coherent sense of self (identity)

Identity is important for psychosocial functioning (i.e., psychological well-being and sociocultural adjustment). Psychological well-being encompasses a general sense of satisfaction, mental health, positive affect (Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann, & Snider, 2001; Schwartz et al., 2010), and self-esteem (Cast & Burke, 2002). Aspects of well-being are often associated with physical health (Hagger, Anderson, Kyriakaki, & Darkings, 2007), work engagement and motivation (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Beyers, & Missotten, 2011), and academic performance (Marcia, 1980; Smith & Silva, 2011). Sociocultural adjustment accounts for the successful participation of individuals in general society, acculturative experiences (Ward, 2006), interpersonal relationships (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000), and intergroup relations (Brown, 2000). Identity is argued to provide the psychological tools that aids individuals in navigating complexities of personal needs, needs of other individuals and groups, as well as the environment. Thus, how we define ourselves – who we are – impacts on how we act (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-McIntyre, 2003).

Acculturation and its associations with identity

Traditionally, acculturation is defined as the psychological and cultural changes in individuals and groups that result from continuous first-hand contact with members from other cultures (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Culture refers to transferable norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes common to a group which inform individual behaviours (Matsumoto, 1996). Acculturative processes or outcomes are often measured using identity and identification (Ward, 2008). Changes in values, beliefs, norms, language, and cultural and religious practices are considered indicators that could be influenced by acculturative change (Sam & Berry, 2010).

Acculturation takes place at both psychological and sociological level (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). At the psychological level changes in language, behaviour, values, beliefs, and norms present within the individual; whereas at the sociological level, these changes present at the group and institutional levels (Bennett, 2014; Berry, 1997; Phinney, 2000). Acculturation at the psychological level interacts with acculturative changes at the group and institutional level and the reciprocal nature of acculturation takes place at both levels. It is at the psychological level that we can examine the association of acculturation by considering personal, relational, and social components of identity as these are negotiated mainly at the individual level. Extant models of acculturation include: (a) unidimensional acculturation, (b) bi-dimensional acculturation, and (c) multidimensional acculturation.

Unidimensional acculturation

Unidimensional acculturation is when immigrants acculturate towards the national or mainstream group to fit into their host society (Yoon et al., 2013). Studies on unidimensional acculturation have focused on changes in personality and attitudes (personal identity adjustment) of those who acculturate towards the culture of their colonisers (social identity adjustment), and the impact on

their psychosocial functioning and well-being (Ainsworth & Ainsworth, 1962a, 1962b, 1962c, 1962d). Better social outcomes are most often found as individuals adjust to the dominant Western culture.

Bi-dimensional model of acculturation

Bi-dimensional model of acculturation seeks to explain the processes involved when individuals navigate two cultures: their own culture, the one from which they originate; and the new culture, the one to which they are exposed. The degree to which individuals prioritise their own culture in comparison with the new culture results in four acculturation outcomes: assimilation, integration, marginalisation, and separation. Individuals who assimilate will adopt and adjust to the other culture in lieu of their own. Individuals who integrate maintain both aspects of their culture while taking on aspects of the other culture. Marginalised individuals reject both their own as well as the other culture; whereas individuals who separate maintain their own culture while rejecting the other culture (Berry, 1997).

Within the African context, there have been several studies that have considered the impact of bi-dimensional acculturation (Adams & Abubakar, 2016). These studies have focused mainly on parenting (relational identity) (Mulatu, 1998; Mulatu & Berry, 2001a, 2001b) and ethnic, religious, and cultural aspects (social identity) (Abubakar, Van de Vijver, Mazrui, Arasa, & Murugani, 2011; Hocoy, 1999, 2000; Jackson, Van de Vijver, & Molokoane, 2013; Naidoo & Mahabeer, 2006). While the study of acculturation considers the individual's culture, the main focus of related studies in Africa has been on individual adaptation and orientation to indigenous and Western cultures as well as how these orientations explain psychological wellbeing (Adams & Abubakar, 2016).

Multidimensional model of acculturation

A multidimensional model of acculturation is one which acknowledges the exchanges that transpire through the continuous, direct interaction that occurs between more than two cultures (Mashau, 2012); in part from globalisation and migration-driven diversity (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015). A multidimensional model of acculturation considers how individuals negotiate their identities within these plural cultural contexts. Polyculturalism is an instance of multi-acculturation in which individuals identify with several different cultural groups (Morris, Chui, & Liu, 2015; Van de Vijver, 2015). Few studies have considered the internal and external aspects of plurality of acculturation in Africa (e.g., Ferguson & Adams, 2016; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Ferguson, 2017).

In the study by Ferguson and Adams (2016) they examined remote acculturation in 370 youth in Johannesburg. They found that Americanisation was more prevalent in South African youth compared to Jamaican youth; notably, the exposure to American media, the relationship between Americanisation and well-being was mainly moderated by racial group membership. In another study by Ferguson and colleagues (Ferguson et al., 2017) of 83 adolescents from Lusaka, they found that adolescents

could be either classified as traditional Zambians (which meant that they were more oriented toward Zambian culture) or Westernised Multicultural Zambians (which meant that they were more oriented toward American, British, and South African contexts). This latter group presented a lower sense of family obligation and were more independent. These studies inform the multidimensional nature which acculturation will take on in future.

Reflections on acculturation and identity in Africa

We see three main concerns in applications of the unidimensional model of acculturation to Africa. Firstly, acculturation towards the Western coloniser is taken as implicit norm and attributed central status in the study of acculturation processes. There is no reason to assume that African cultures will eventually converge towards the culture of their colonisers. Secondly, the diversity of many African countries does not allow for the unidimensional model of acculturation because very few African countries have a single dominant local culture (Nsamenang & Dawes, 1998). While one cannot deny the impact of the Western culture, either through globalisation or colonisation (Nsamenang, 2013); studies of acculturation would need to consider incorporating the contextual diversity created by multiple interacting cultures. Thirdly, applications of the unidimensional model have focused on social aspects, which, when viewed from an identity perspective, introduces an emphasis on social identity and an underrating of interpersonal and personal aspects of identity. The former is of particular importance within the African context as interpersonal aspects in relation to social identity aspects are crucial to informing personal identity aspects (Nsamenang, 2010).

The bi-dimensional model of identity also mainly considers social aspects of identity. Even where parenting is considered as a relational aspect of identity, this is an outcome associated with the degree to which the Western culture (social identity) is valued. A recent publication by Adams and Van de Vijver (2015) argues for the inclusion of personal and relational aspects of identity within the bi-dimensional model of acculturation. Their primary argument is that personal values, aspirations, and goals, as well as relationships with others and the roles individuals fulfil; would have a major influence on the extent to which individuals adopt another culture into their own. In addition, African scholars (Adams, 2014; Nsamenang, 2010; Nsamenang, 2013; Serpell, 2002) have argued for the continued need to include in particular how context specific aspects of socialisation would inform identity development from an African perspective. Taken together, this would have consequences not only for the acculturation outcomes, but also people's psychological well-being and social functioning (Adams & Van de Vijver, 2015). Similar to the unidimensional model of acculturation, the bi-cultural model of acculturation does not account for the multicultural nature of the African context and the importance of interpersonal relationships within these context for understanding identity development and its association with the acculturation process.

While strides are made towards accommodating more plurality in acculturation studies, as with the

multidimensional model; it is again evident that the influence of Western culture remains dominant for understanding acculturative processes in Africa (Raffaelli, Lazarevic, Koller, Nsamenang, & Sharma, 2013; Serpell, 2014). Even in multidimensional considerations of acculturation, outcomes of acculturation seem to be somewhat associated with Western cultural values, norms, and attitudes (Adams & Abubakar, 2016). Remarkably, this is also the case in studies of remote acculturation (cultural changes due to indirect contact); the emphasis is on the degree to which individuals adopt Western norms, values and practices, and identify with western cultures with which they have made little or no contact but which are remotely transferred through media, social media, and/or goods and services (Ferguson & Adams, 2016; Ferguson et al., 2017). Identity is diffused in some African contexts. In the development of a multidimensional acculturative model suited for the African context, we need to consider the levels of identity within dimensions as well.

Consider for a moment the implications related to the complexity associated with components of the social identity dimension in Africa. Firstly, the notion of national identity as a construct which encapsulates identification with the nation state (Liebkind, Mähönen, Varjonen, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2016) may be problematic in contexts with salient social identity components, such as tribal membership, ethnicity, religion, and language; which may be more important than national identity. In an effort to move beyond the national identities established by the colonially-ruled nation states, national identities in Africa encapsulate multicultural identities. Individuals and groups may emphasise different social identities, transcending the traditional ethnic-racial markers imposed by colonial nations (Ganathay-Coleman & Serpell, 2008; Nsamenang & Dawes, 1998).

Secondly, within the acculturation process, salience of different social identities may need to be continuously negotiated. Different social identities, such as ethnic, cultural, and national identities, are associated with different behaviours, values, norms, and practices (Yoon et al., 2013). In an African context, identity models should leave room for multiple allegiances referring to multiple domains. The prevailing acculturation research is predicated on the notion that migrants identify with one or two cultures. Allegiances in an African context are multidimensional and may involve multiple life domains; for example, a young South African Muslim may have a strong religious, ethnic, age, gender, musical, and sports identity; each identity would link him or her to different groups. Capturing his or her identity in two dimensions (Indian, South-African) would be inadequate.

Why study identity and acculturation in transitional African societies?

From an identity perspective, the African cultural setting seems to be experiencing a period of transition where many are seeking not only to define themselves and the roles they seek to play within their respective societies, but also the very nations in which they live. They seek to establish, negotiate, and maintain a national identity in which they embrace the diversity harboured within

their borders. African contexts are complex; countries are often vastly multicultural; and in many countries no group clearly dominates all aspects of social, political, economic, and cultural life spheres. More inquiry is needed into acculturation processes, and this inquiry should start with the conceptualisation of identity of individuals within the African context. Identity is key, central, and pivotal here, not only for the nation but every individual who finds meaning within the confines of the respective country's borders.

Acculturation is traditionally studied in Western (North American and Western European) countries, where migrants and minorities come into first-hand contact with the majority, mainstream, or dominant sociocultural groups. Within these contexts, minority groups are economically, socially, and politically worse off than their mainstream counterparts. They are often identified and differentiated from the mainstream population by the colour of their skins, their spoken language, and religious beliefs. They are culturally different and distal and are often expected to ascribe to the norms and values of the mainstream group for their survival. Thus, while acculturation may inform the demographic and ecological changes in different groups, even under the more established bi-dimensional model of acculturation; the acculturation process differs between dominant and non-dominant groups. In the traditional Western contexts where acculturation is studied, dominant groups are free to choose which cultural aspects of other groups, if any, they may incorporate into their own. This dominance places them in a privileged position that allows them to decide the extent to which they would acculturate. This is often not the case for individuals from minority groups that are often required to assimilate or integrate fully to survive within the new context.

In the African context, the traditional conception of minority and majority or mainstream and immigrant does not necessarily exist because the diverse nature of many countries, regions, and societies was established during colonisation or has an even longer history. The result is therefore that different ethnic group membership transcends national boundaries and that very few countries have a clear numerical majority. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that some groups do not carry more influence than others. Within the African context, the conceptualisation of dominant and non-dominant groups may carry more weight. Here groups, even numerical minorities, were often valued as allies by colonialists for many different reasons; such as being easily integrated or having a lighter skin colour than other groups. Different groups also sought to align themselves with colonisers due to the economic and social benefits. However, whatever the reason for these alignments, at the end of colonisation some African tribal and ethnic groups assumed dominance within their respective contexts and have benefited (mainly economically) from these alignments, even after the demise of colonisation. This has affirmed their dominance. Firstly, this has resulted in much ethnic strife as certain groups sought to remain the true owners of the land and its resources. Secondly, this has also created national contexts where ethnic groups, although dominant, do not

necessarily require other groups to integrate and assimilate to their own culture.

Tri-dimensional model of identity for acculturation

A tri-dimensional model of identity, which comprises personal identity, relational identity, and social identity, may have considerable explanatory value for acculturation in African settings (see Figure 1). This is because within the African contexts acculturation needs to accommodate not only the complexity associated with juggling multiple social identity components associated with negotiating a cultural plethora (Van de Vijver, 2015), but also the personal and relational components of identity.

This multidimensional model of acculturation has to tackle important, as yet understudied issues. What are those personal (individual values, attitudes, goals, and aspirations), relational (interpersonal relationships and roles), and social (culture, religion, ethnicity, and language) aspects of identity pertinent for self-definition and how do they contribute toward how individuals create meaning about themselves within their society? What role do these other dimensions play in how individuals relate to not only their groups but also the many different groups with whom they come into contact? How do these interactions promote acculturative integration needed for the development of a clear national identity? Do these aspects build on integrating and navigating the multicultural contexts of which many African societies are made up? More importantly, does this comprehensive conceptualisation of identity in relation to acculturation promote enhanced psychosocial functioning at both individual and group levels?

Studies are needed to develop a scientific protocol for improving our understanding of identity and acculturation in African societies – societies in transition. Learning from the experiences and problems of Western models, African scholars could make their models more suitable for their local context. This could be achieved through combining both emic (qualitative, cultural specific) and etic (quantitative, cross-cultural) approaches to the study of both identity and acculturation.

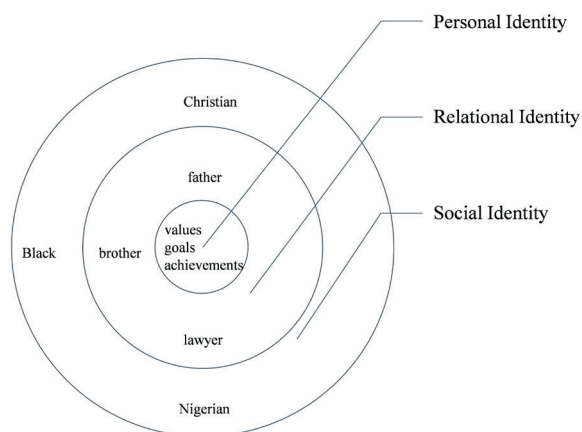


Figure 1. Tri-dimensional model of identity

Note. The circles present examples of identity aspects within the dimensions

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to examine the relevance of the tri-dimensional model of identity (personal, relational, and social identity) for the different models of acculturation. How people define themselves – their identities – is important in multicultural contexts, as it has become an important consideration over the last few decades; particularly in multicultural contexts. As the world is becoming a global melting pot of different people, and individuals become more and more exposed through media to cultures with whom they may never have contact; the aspect of culture and cultural identity has become incredibly more fluid over the last few years. In essence, it is important for us to understand that acculturation encourages a context in which there are common practices, behaviours, and values to which the large majority of people within a context ascribe. This commonality serves the purpose of ensuring social cohesion, which ensures that individuals from different groups are bound to certain social conventions that would benefit social interaction within the broader society.

We need to study the association between identity and acculturation, and the intersectionality of these constructs and their respective dimensions. The study of the relationship between identity and acculturation has often been somewhat fragmented, in that there has been a focus on only certain aspects of identity (mainly social) and its association with acculturation (Ward, 2008). The African context, with its many societies in transition, provides an opportunity for deeper inquiry, particularly the development of a multidimensional model of acculturation.

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