

# **The interplay of social context and personal attributes in immigrants' adaptation and satisfaction with the move to Australia**

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## **Abstract**

Previous psychological research into immigration has tended to focus either on immigrants' adjustive behaviours, such as their acculturation preference, or on community attitudes towards immigrants. Recent models bring these lines of research together. This study examined effects of immigrants' perceptions of acceptance or rejection by the broader community (inclusionary status) on their psychological adaptation and satisfaction, and how this operates together with acculturation preference and first friendships.

One hundred thirty-seven immigrants to Australia from 46 countries completed an English-language questionnaire. Results showed good psychological adaptation to life in Australia and strong satisfaction. Contrary to previous findings, preference for assimilation predicted greater satisfaction. The one variable that consistently predicted psychological adaptation and satisfaction when all other variables were controlled was inclusionary status. This related with preference for contact with Australians. First friendships were also important. To the extent that first friendships were among Australians, participants reported greater social inclusion, and this mediated a relation with better psychological adaptation.

The results speak to the importance of providing opportunities for immigrants to make new friends in the receiving community. Future research should address acculturation preferences among Australians, and examine a possible disjunct between government policy and mainstream attitudes.

## **Keywords**

Acceptance, Acculturation, Immigration,  
Prejudice, Psychological adaptation,  
Sociocultural adaptation, Social inclusion

## **THE INTERPLAY OF SOCIAL CONTEXT AND PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES IN IMMIGRANTS' ADAPTATION AND SATISFACTION WITH THE MOVE TO AUSTRALIA**

On 28<sup>th</sup> September 2007, Liep Gony, a Sudanese teenager who had arrived as a refugee to Australia, was tragically murdered in a racially motivated attack in Melbourne. Following the incident, the Australian Government significantly reduced the annual intake of Sudanese refugees on the grounds that Sudanese did not integrate well into the Australian community. In relation to this decision, the then Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews, stated: 'I have been concerned that some groups don't seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life as quickly as we would hope and therefore it makes sense to put the extra money in to provide extra resources, but also to slow down the rate of intake from countries such as Sudan' (Farouque et al. 2007). This response by the Australian government illustrates the tension that arises between the host culture and immigrants when expectations of one another's acculturative behaviours are out of step. In the case of the Australian Government, disappointment at Sudanese acculturation led to the decision to exclude many refugees from this war-torn country.

Acculturation is a term that describes the adaptations that individuals and communities make when individuals move between cultures (Redfield et al. 1936). Berry (1974,1980) proposed that there are two underlying dimensions of acculturation. The first of these is the extent to which immigrants wish to maintain their original culture; the second is how much they desire relationships and contact with members of the host society. The

combination of these creates four distinct acculturation preferences or strategies. These are *integration*, where the immigrant prefers to maintain original cultural identity and also have relationships with receiving community members; *assimilation*, where the immigrant prefers to abandon their original cultural identity and seek contact with receiving community members; *separation*, where the immigrant favours maintenance of the original cultural identity and no engagement with the receiving community; and *marginalisation*, where the immigrant prefers to abandon their original cultural identity and also does not wish to engage with host society members. Most studies have found that immigrants express preference for integration (Berry 1997; Van de Vijver et al. 1999; van Oudenhaven et al. 1998). Furthermore, integration has been found to relate to better psychological adaptation and reduced acculturative stress (Berry 1997; Berry et al. 1987; Liebkind 1996; 2001).

Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal (1997) made the point that host societies, too, have preferences for the extent to which they prefer immigrants to maintain their original culture and seek contact with the mainstream society. Following Berry's scheme, these preferences were categorised in the Interactive Acculturation Model into integration, assimilation, segregation (equivalent to separation), and exclusion (equivalent to marginalisation). They further proposed that intergroup difficulties arise when there is poor match between acculturation preferences of the host society and particular immigrant groups. For example, if a society desires that immigrants assimilate, but immigrants desire separation, a conflictual relationship will arise. Empirical research has supported this contention (Zagefka & Brown 2002), and as shown in the example above, the consequences of a mismatch can be dire.

It is important to recognise that acculturation attitudes of the host and the immigrant group are not immutable; there is an interplay where one influences the other. As Berry (2001) pointed out, the choices of immigrants in their acculturation behaviours are likely constrained by the orientations of the receiving society. There is little opportunity to integrate if members of the receiving society prefer segregation and refuse to interact with the newcomers. Integration requires the receiving society to be accepting of immigrants, and willing to accept and accommodate their cultural identity. Equally, the immigrant needs to be willing to accept the culture of the host nation. Thus, receiving community members' acceptance or rejection of immigrants' culture of origin and contact with those immigrants

has implications for how they integrate in their new community.

Abundant psychological research has shown that people are acutely sensitive to signals of others' acceptance and rejection and alter their behaviours accordingly. They quickly become dejected when ostracised (Williams 2007), and attempt to increase their social acceptability (Williams 2009). Even self-esteem fluctuates dramatically as a result of feeling social accepted or rejected (Leary & Baumeister 2000).

Nesdale (2002) examined the effects of social acceptance and rejection on immigrants' identification with Australia and with their original culture. Acceptance by Australians was significantly related to host-country identification, but not ethnic identification. Nonetheless, friendships showed a different pattern; those who had few Australian friends also identified more with their ethnic group.

The current research investigated the relations between feeling accepted by the host society (inclusionary status), and immigrants' acculturation. We first examined whether there was a direct relation between inclusionary status and psychological and sociocultural adaptation when a range of other variables was taken into account. We next examined the relations between social acceptance and acculturation preferences. Nesdale's research had shown lack of friendships with Australians was an important predictor of ethnic ingroup identification, and other research has also shown important effects of the extent to which early friendships focus on members of the receiving community versus members of the immigrants' ethnic group (see Kosic et al. 2004). This is possibly an important determinant of inclusionary status and was therefore included in the current study.

## METHOD

### Participants

One hundred and thirty-seven immigrants to Australia participated in this research. These were 85 women and 52 men from 46 countries. They ranged in age from 22 to 93 years (average = 49), and had been in Australia between two months and 63 years, with an average of 16 years. Almost one quarter of participants had been in Australia for under three years, and 50 percent had been in Australia under 9 years.

## Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire that contained several demographic measures (gender, age, marital status, education, country of origin, length of time in Australia, citizenship, reason for moving, initial reference group, and main current activity or job in Australia) and then a number of computed measures which included:

*Inclusionary status* (Spivey 1990). Measures the extent to which people feel socially included. Participants rate on a scale from '1 = Strongly disagree' to '7 = Strongly agree' nine items such as 'People in Australia often seek out my company', and 'I often feel like an outsider at social gatherings in Australia'. High scores indicate greater social inclusion.

*Acculturation preference* (Zagefka & Brown 2002). Measures the extent to which individuals desire (i) maintenance of their culture of origin and (ii) contact with members of the host culture. These two sub-scales can be combined to identify whether immigrants show preference for integration, assimilation, separation or marginalisation (Berry 1989). For maintenance, participants rated on the 7-point scale from '1 = Strongly disagree' to '7 = Strongly agree', 'I think that people from my country living in Australia should maintain their own religion, language and way of dressing' and 'I think that people from my country living in Australia should maintain their way of living'. For contact they responded to: 'I think it is important that people from my country living in Australia have friends who are Australian nationals' and 'I think it is important that people from my country living in Australia spend time with Australian nationals in their spare time'.

*Psychological adaptation* (Kosic et al, 2004). Measures psychological adaptation among immigrants. Respondents rate from '1 = Never' to '5 = All the time' eighteen items relating to how frequently during the last month they have felt distressed, angry, anxious and so on. For each individual, the mean across these eighteen items was computed, so results can vary from 1 (poor adaptation) to 5 (good adaptation).

*Sociocultural adaptation*. Two components of sociocultural adaptation were measured. These were satisfaction and difficulty experienced on arrival. For satisfaction, participants rated the following three items on a scale from '1 = Extremely dissatisfied' to '7 = Extremely satisfied': 'If employed, how satisfied are you with your job?', 'How satisfied are you with your accommodation', and 'How satisfied are you with your life in

Australia?' For difficulty, they rated on a scale from '1 = Extremely easy' to '7 = Extremely difficult, I have not solved the problem' the difficulty they had in dealing with various aspects of their life in Australia. Satisfaction was coded so that high scores indicate high satisfaction, and difficulty was coded so that high scores indicate high difficulty.

*First friendships and current friendships* (Kosic et al. 2004). Participants were asked to indicate on a scale from '1 = None' to '5 = Almost all' the number of people among their first friends in Australia who were Australians, and the number who were people from their country (co-ethnic), spoke the same language, or other immigrants.<sup>1</sup> These same questions were posed for the friends they have now in Australia. From these, it was possible to compute an index of the number of contacts among their first friends and current friends who were Australian in comparison with each other group. Results can range from 4 (mostly Australians) to -4 (mostly people from own country).

Two additional variables were included as controls:

*Language skills on arrival and at present*. Participants rated on a 7-point scale from '1 = Not at all' to '7 = Perfectly' four items such as 'How fluently do you speak English?' and 'How well do you understand the newspaper, written in English?' that measured their language skills when they first arrived in Australia, and at present. High scores indicate better language skills.

*Communication skills on arrival and at present* (modified from Gudykunst & Nishida 2001). Participants rated on a 7-point scale from '1 = Strongly disagree' to '7 = Strongly agree' five items such as 'My communication with Australians is mostly efficient', and 'I feel mostly competent when communicating with Australians' that measured their communication skills when they first arrived in Australia, and at present. High scores indicate better communication skills.

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<sup>1</sup> To keep things simple, the term 'Australian' was not explicated. However, as the other questions asked about the number of friends who were from their country, had the same first language as them, or were other immigrants, 'Australian' would indicate not from their country, with their same first language, or immigrants.

## Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed with the help of multicultural organisations in New South Wales who agreed to distribute hard copies of the questionnaire to members and clients, and also via a link to an online survey that was placed on websites belonging to ethnic clubs and associations, and circulated by email by research partners. Participants first read an invitation to participate, which specified they must be immigrants to Australia, currently living in Australia, and over the age of 18. If they wished to participate, they then worked through the questionnaire and, if completing the printed version, returned it in a reply-paid envelope.

## RESULTS

Preliminary data analysis consisted of testing the internal reliability of each of the scales using Cronbach's alpha. Scales proved reliable: psychological adaptation (0.91); satisfaction (0.72); difficulty (0.80); inclusionary status (0.91); preference for culture maintenance (0.93); preference for contact (0.84); language skills on arrival (0.99); language skills at present (0.97); communication skills on arrival (0.95); communication skills at present (0.87).

### Psychological adaptation

On average, participants showed good psychological adaptation (mean = 3.8, std deviation = .66). A minority of participants (15, or 11.3 percent) reported scores below the scale midpoint of 3, three participants scored on the midpoint of 3, and the remaining 113 participants (85 percent) scored above the midpoint. Thus, 85 percent of participants showed positive adaptation within the host culture.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictors of psychological adaptation. Variables entered into the analysis included: Age; length of stay; preference for culture maintenance; preference for contact; language on arrival; language now; communication on arrival; communication now; difficulty on arrival; satisfaction. Inclusionary status was entered on a second step as it was of particular interest to identify whether inclusionary status would mediate any relationships with psychological adaptation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This would be indicated where there was a significant effect at Step 1, which disappeared at Step 2, when inclusionary status was included in the equation.

It was also of interest to identify whether there was an interaction of preference for culture maintenance and contact. This was entered as a third step in the analysis, and would capture the four different acculturation strategies of assimilation, integration, separation, marginalisation.

**Table 1. Summary of regressions onto psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation (satisfaction). Shows direction of significant relations, +ve or -ve.**

Predictor	Psych. Adaptation	Sociocultural adaptation (satisfaction)
Inclusionary status	Sig (+ve)	Sig (+ve)
Age	Sig (+ve)	Ns
Length of stay	ns	Ns
Preference for culture maintenance	ns	Ns
Preference for contact	ns	Ns
Language on arrival	ns	Ns
Language now	ns	Ns
Communication on arrival	Sig (+ve)	Ns
Communication now	ns	Ns
Difficulty on arrival	ns	Ns
Psych adaptation (control variable)	-	Sig (+ve)
Satisfaction (control variable)	Sig (+ve)	-
Acculturation Maintenance*Contact	ns	Sig (-ve)

There were 126 cases in the analysis. Step 2 explained significantly more variance in psychological adaptation than Step 1, but the model was not improved with the addition of the interaction term in Step 3, and there were no significant moderation effects. Thus, Step 2 is the preferred model. Significant predictors of psychological adaptation at Step 2 were age (std beta = .402,  $p = .012$ ), communication on arrival (std beta = .261,  $p = .046$ ), satisfaction (std beta = .238,  $p = .016$ ), and inclusionary status (std beta = .290,  $p = .012$ ).

### Sociocultural adaptation (satisfaction)

On average, participants were satisfied with the move to Australia (mean = 5.7, std deviation = 1.3; on the scale, 6 = 'Satisfied'). Only ten participants (8.5 percent) scored below the scale's neutral mid-point of 4.

A stepwise multiple regression analysis of the same design as for psychological adaptation examined the predictors of satisfaction. There were 123 cases in this analysis. Step 3 provided the best fit to the data, and is therefore the preferred model. Significant predictors of satisfaction at Step 3 were preference for contact (std beta = .330,  $p = .001$ ), psychological adaptation (std beta = .222,  $p = .010$ ), inclusionary status (std beta = .275,  $p = .013$ ), and the interaction of preference for culture maintenance and contact (std beta = -.229,  $p = .016$ ).

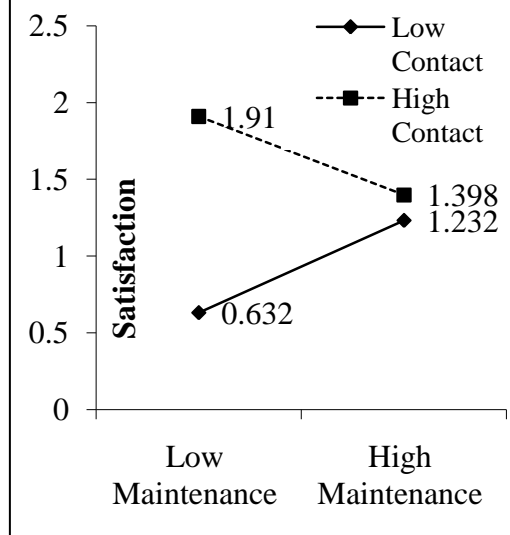
The interaction effect maps onto the four different acculturation preferences of assimilation (low maintenance, high contact), integration (high maintenance, high contact), separation (high maintenance, low contact), and marginalisation (low maintenance, low contact). Breakdown of this effect revealed that satisfaction was least when participants showed more marginalisation preference (low maintenance, low contact), and highest when they showed more assimilation preference (low maintenance, high contact).

### Inclusionary status

On average, participants partially agreed that they feel socially included by Australians (mean = 5.0, std deviation = 1.3; on the 7-point scale, 5 = 'Partially agree'). However, over one third of participants (37.8 percent, or 51 individuals) scored below the scale's neutral midpoint of 4, indicating that they felt socially excluded.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relations between inclusionary status and acculturation preference while controlling for other variables. Predictors entered into the regression equation were length of stay, language skills on arrival and now, communication skills on arrival and now, difficulty on arrival, preference for culture maintenance, preference for contact, and the interaction between these two. Among these, the only significant predictors of inclusionary status were length of stay (std beta = .176,  $p = .050$ ), communication skills now (std beta = .358,  $p < .01$ ), and preference for contact (std beta = .408,  $p < .001$ ). Participants who felt more included had better communication skills, had been longer in Australia, and showed greater preference for contact with Australians.

**Figure 1. Interaction of acculturation maintenance and contact in their effect on immigrants' satisfaction.**



### Friendships with Australians and co-ethnics

A partial correlation matrix, controlling for age and length of stay, was used to scrutinise the relations between first friends Australian and current friends Australian and other variables. In fact, first friends and current friends correlated with almost all variables (see Table 2).

*First friends Australian.* The extent to which first friends were Australians strongly correlated with the extent to which current friends were Australian. It also moderately correlated with inclusionary status and communication on arrival. The other correlations were smaller in magnitude, ranging downwards from .356. The only variables first friend Australians did not correlate with were satisfaction, problem solving, and preference for culture maintenance.

*Current friends Australian.* The extent to which current friends were Australians correlated moderately with inclusionary status. It also correlated moderately with communication on arrival, communication now, and language now. The other correlations were reasonably small in magnitude, ranging downwards from .321. The only variables current friends Australian did not correlate with were satisfaction and problem solving.

**Table 2. Partial correlations between the extent to which first friends and current friends are Australian compared with co-ethnic, and a range of other variables, while controlling for age and length of time in Australia (df=96).**

Variable	First friends Australian	Current friends Australian
First friends Australian	-	.622***
Current friends Australian	.622***	-
Psychological adaptation	.229**	.177
Satisfaction	.022	.147
Inclusionary status	.467***	.566***
Preference for culture maintenance	-.143	-.269**
Preference for contact	.246*	.321***
Language on arrival	.244*	.184
Language now	.356***	.387***
Communication on arrival	.409***	.416***
Communication now	.266**	.409***
Difficulty	-.207*	-.268**

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

*Mediation analysis.* First friends Australian and current friends Australian both related quite strongly with inclusionary status, and less strongly with psychological adaptation. Given that inclusionary status is a reliable predictor of psychological adaptation, we tested two mediation paths where:

First friends Australian -> inclusionary status -> psychological adaptation

Current friends Australian -> inclusionary status -> psychological adaptation.

The first mediation analysis examined (while controlling for length of stay) the relation between initial friends Australian and inclusionary status, and then the relation between inclusionary status and psychological adaptation when initial friends Australian is included in the relation. The beta coefficients and std errors from these two analyses were then submitted to Sobel's test, which yielded a

significant result of 3.13,  $p < .001$ . There were 100 cases in this analysis.

The second mediation analysis then used the same design to test whether inclusionary status mediated a relation between current friends Australian and psychological adaptation. Sobel's test revealed a significant result of 3.31,  $p < .001$ . There were 111 cases in this analysis. Testing the reverse path also yielded a significant result (Sobel = 3.748,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>3</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Inclusionary status significantly related both to psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Immigrants who felt more socially included by the host culture were better psychologically adjusted, and more satisfied with their life in Australia. They also showed greater preference for contact with Australians. Importantly, immigrants' initial contacts when they arrived in Australia predicted their later connections. Those whose first friends were mostly Australians also reported that their current friends were mostly Australians. These participants also showed stronger inclusionary status and better psychological adaptation. Indeed, the two mediation effects showed that inclusionary status explained the relation between friendships and psychological adaptation. It seems that those who start out making friends with receiving community members are ultimately happier in their new location.

One particularly interesting result was the relation between acculturation preference and satisfaction. First, there was a main effect of preference for contact where, after taking into account the effects of inclusionary status, language and communication skills, and other control variables, those who believed contact with Australians was important were ultimately more satisfied with their life in Australia. Second, there was an interaction between the two dimensions of preference for contact and preference for cultural maintenance. Those who showed greater preference for assimilation (lower culture maintenance and higher contact with Australians) reported the most satisfaction, more so than those who showed greater preference for integration. A similar finding was recently reported by Salleh-Hoddin (2009), where Muslim Australians who favoured assimilation reported less discrimination.

<sup>3</sup> The reverse path for initial friends could not be logically be tested as psychological adaptation now cannot predict friends made some time in the past.

Given that integration is usually lauded as the strategy that predicts the best adaptation for immigrants, these two recent findings require some attention. We suggest it could result from a mismatch between immigrants' and receiving community acculturation preferences. Australia is one of the few countries to hold an official government policy of multiculturalism (van Oudenhaven 2006). However, what governments legislate does not dictate public attitudes (Bourhis et al. 1997). To our knowledge, a comprehensive survey of Australian acculturation preferences is yet to be undertaken, but there are indications that mainstream attitudes in Australia may not reflect government policy. A survey of over 5,000 people in Queensland and New South Wales reported by Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, and McDonald (2004) revealed that, while the large majority of participants agreed that 'It is a good thing for a society to be made up of people from different cultures', less than half *disagreed* that 'Australia is weakened by different ethnicities sticking to their old ways'. Thus, while Australians enjoy the presence of cultural diversity, the populace appear to endorse assimilation rather than integration, and this is at odds with official government policy. This would be in line with acculturation attitudes in most nations (interestingly, with the exception of New Zealand, who show preference for integration; van Oudenhaven 2006). It is possible that higher satisfaction among those who show more endorsement of assimilation reflects a better match with the receiving community's expectations. Future research urgently needs to measure Australian acculturation preferences in general, and in relation to particular groups.

There are, of course, limitations to the conclusions we can draw from the current data. The sample of only 137 does not permit breakdown into different cultures of origin, and the correlational design does not allow us to speak to causation; that would require a longitudinal study or an experimental design. Furthermore, the English-language questionnaire limited responding to those who were proficient in written English. However, while acknowledging these limitations, our results speak to the importance of welcoming new immigrants to this country. Those who are able to make friends with members of the receiving community feel more socially included and are subsequently better adjusted than those whose first friendships are more exclusively among co-ethnics. Importantly, and as was reported by Nesdale (2002), this does not appear to mean abandoning their original culture.

In some places community groups have been set up specifically with the purpose of

welcoming new immigrants and giving them an opportunity to make new friends in the receiving community. Indeed, recent research by Oh (2008) found that international students at the University of Sydney who were partnered with an Australian student for just one week reported significantly increased feelings of acceptance and decreased homesickness compared to controls. In line with this, our research suggests that such support programs might be one of the most positive steps a community can take to enhance immigrants' wellbeing and satisfaction in their new home.

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