

# Acculturation: Conceptualization and Measurement

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*Originally published in the April 1998 issue of Quirk's Marketing Research Review*

## **The question of cultural preservation or assimilation**

As market researchers, a question we frequently hear is: "Aren't Hispanics gradually assimilating into the mainstream of US culture and, consequently becoming part of the 'General Market?'"

This is an important and understandable question, deserving of careful consideration. The research answer involves an understanding of immigration patterns, socio-political realities, and cultural tendencies of Hispanics in the US. Some marketers may argue that if Hispanics are becoming part of the "General Market," why should anyone bother to design specialized strategic approaches to target the Hispanic market?

The conceptualization and measurement of acculturation becomes particularly relevant in addressing that key concern. Marketing practitioners can only answer that question empirically, through research.

## **A conceptual framework**

In contrast to tendencies of immigrants who came to the US at the turn of the century, Hispanics have seemed to maintain their original culture to a large extent. The reasons are complicated and include the following:

- It is estimated that about 75% of all US Hispanics were born outside the United States, consequently their first language is Spanish. Also, immigration of Latin Americans to the US continues to be strong, particularly from Mexico.
- US Hispanics find welcoming niches in US society where they can enjoy their original language and culture.
- Many US Hispanics are very close geographically to their country of origin (most US Hispanics are from Mexico, about 65%).
- Modern telephony and aviation allows for frequent contact with their culture of origin.
- Electronic media, including movies, television, video-recordings, and the Internet, allow for the continuation of the cultural experience initiated in their countries or origin.

So, to a large extent, US Hispanics and other modern day immigrants can customize their private cultural experience. Many US Hispanics continue to speak Spanish and are closely

tied to their cultural roots; however, many do learn the language and culture of the majority society, and thus become bicultural and bilingual to varying degrees.

### **So, do Hispanics acculturate or assimilate?**

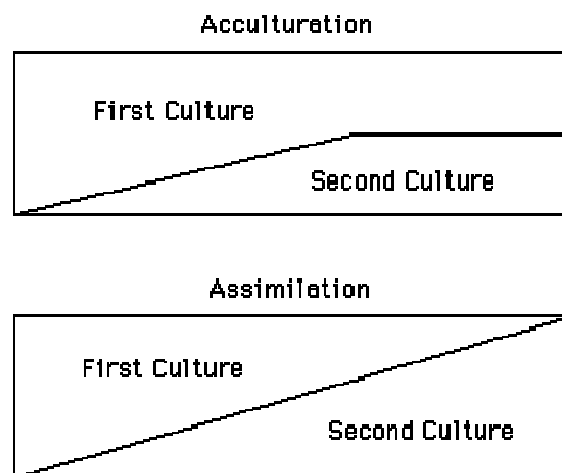
Enculturation is the process of learning one's first and original culture. That is, the socialization process that influences how we behave, think, and feel from early in life. Acculturation, on the other hand, is generally considered to be the process of learning a second culture. Further, and in contrast to acculturation, assimilation is understood to be the abandonment of one's first culture in favor of a second culture.

So, all people are enculturated in a culture of origin. Some immigrants to another country may gradually lose their original culture in favor of the second, thus assimilating. Many immigrants, however, may learn the second culture but may prefer to preserve their original culture as well. That is, they decide to acculturate by adding a second culture to their behavioral repertoire.

Those who acculturate but do not assimilate may keep their culture of origin for enjoyment around friends and family, and for personal satisfaction. That is what seems to happen with a large number of Hispanics. They may in varying degrees learn the US mainstream culture but do not abandon their original culture<sup>1</sup>.

### **Acculturation and assimilation are continual**

There are multiple degrees of acculturation and assimilation. Talking about perfect biculturalism may be fruitless because people acquire cultures to varying degrees. So we are talking about continua. The following diagrams may serve to illustrate the concepts:



<sup>1</sup> Another important consideration is that culture is contextual. Certain aspects of culture may be selectively learned or preserved depending on the specific needs of the individual. Someone may be "very Mexican" in family life, and quite "American" at work.

In describing acculturation, one sees a gradual acquisition of the second culture, and then a state of equilibrium in which both cultures play a role. The exact point at which the first and the second culture stabilize is expected to vary widely. For some, the first culture may play a role of much greater importance throughout their entire lives than the second culture.

For others, the second culture may take over completely, as illustrated in the lower part of the diagram. In this case, assimilation can be viewed as an extreme case of acculturation, in which the second culture dominates totally.

Also, it is important to notice that acculturation and/or assimilation can happen in one generation or across several generations. For example, some individuals of Mexican origin in Falfurrias, Texas, may still preserve the culture of their ancestors with relatively little modification, and their participation in the US general culture may be somewhat limited.

### **So, how do we measure acculturation?**

There are diverse indicators of acculturation, the most common ones being:

- Language usage
- Media behavior
- Ties to people in country of origin
- Length of US residency
- Value expressions
- Interpersonal network composition

In our practice of marketing research, the indexes used to account for acculturation may include measurements for many or just a few of the above indicators. One would choose fewer indicators when the nature of the study requires brevity. Sometimes the choice of items depends on the conceptual nature of the study.

#### ***Language indicators***

A good proxy for language usage is a set of items measuring the amount of English or Spanish spoken in different situations. A very appropriate scale is: On a scale<sup>2</sup> from zero to ten, zero being "not at all" and ten being "a lot" please tell me how much you<sup>3</sup>...

- Speak Spanish when at home?
- Speak English when at home?

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<sup>2</sup> A zero to ten scale has been shown to be reliably and validly used by Hispanic respondents.

<sup>3</sup> The full instruction for the scale is not included here. It needs to be stressed to respondents that they can use any number in the scale. Also the scale needs to be read for them at least for the first two items.

- Speak Spanish when at work?
- Speak English when at work?
- Speak Spanish with friends?
- Speak English with friends?

While other context-specific items can be included, these should suffice to provide an indication of the prevalence of Spanish and English spoken in key daily life contexts. The reader can see that by having a separate scale for each item, a respondent could give a high score to all items. That would demonstrate a relatively high degree of acculturation into the second language while at the same time preserving the first language<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Media behaviors***

Media exposure tends to be even more amenable to continuous measurement. Thus, asking the following renders good discrimination:

- About how many hours per week do you usually spend watching television in Spanish?
- About how many hours per week do you usually spend watching television in English?
- About how many hours per week do you usually spend listening to the radio in Spanish?
- About how many hours per week do you usually spend listening to the radio in English?

Other media behaviors, particularly for print, can also be included. Again, the nature of the study generally influences which items may be most relevant. Clearly, the resulting mix of number of hours of exposure to each medium and language can be in any combination. That allows for the measurement of any degree of acculturation or assimilation.

### ***Length of US residency***

This is an interesting indicator of exposure to the US mainstream. The number of years of US residency divided by age provides a fraction that indicates the proportion of an individual's life spent in the second culture.

### ***Value expressions***

Attitude statements that reflect cultural orientations are of great value in the measurement of acculturation. We usually measure these statements on a zero to ten scale similar to that described above, i.e.: "On a scale from zero to ten, where zero means "totally disagree" and ten means "totally agree", how much do you agree with each of the following statements?"

- One of my most important goals is to get ahead in life

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<sup>4</sup> Someone could argue that speaking Spanish or English are discrete activities, and that one could not speak a lot of English and Spanish at the same time. Perceptually, however, expressing that one speaks both languages "a lot" could best represent the reality of an individual, and that duality may more accurately portray his/her degree of acculturation.

- My family comes first in my decisions about life options
- I long to return to the land of my ancestors

These are only three examples of a large battery from which we choose value orientations. These represent expressions of values that lean towards the US mainstream or to traditional Hispanic values.

### ***Interpersonal network composition***

The proportion of friends who are of one's own cultural background also serves as an indicator of acculturation or lack of it. Thus, one can ask: Of ten of your friends, how many of them are Hispanic?

Other indicators of acculturation can also be used, including kinship relationships, and food customs. For the sake of example, however the above categories may suffice.

### **How to create the index?**

An index of acculturation can then be created as follows:

- Run a confirmatory, one factor, factor analytic solution on all the above indicators
- Use the factor score coefficients of the solution, preserving their sign
- Create an index of the following type:  

$$\text{Acculturation Index} = (B1)X1 + (B2)X2 + (B3)X3 + \dots + (Bn)Xn$$

In the above index the beta coefficients are the factor score coefficients from the factor analytic solution. Consequently, the final index reflects the degree to which an individual uses language, media, second culture residency, expresses cultural values, and has a first culture network. The meaning of the sign of the resulting score can be interpreted depending on the sign patterns obtained in the factor analysis. That is, if those items leaning towards Spanish tend to load positively, then the English ones are likely to load negatively<sup>5</sup>.

### **And now you have a powerful index**

The resulting index can be used for the prediction of different types of consumer behaviors. As a continuum it allows marketers to talk about acculturation as a matter of degree.

Those who prefer categories can take segments of the continuum in the index to label diverse types of consumers, thus constituting insightful psychographic profiles.

And quite importantly, the continuum of acculturation allows for the empirical answer to the question: To what extent do Hispanics assimilate or acculturate?

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<sup>5</sup> Depending on the subgroup being studied, this is not always the case. A bicultural community may have all items loading positively.

