

Chapter 17

Understanding the Experiences of Immigrant Adolescents: Acculturation Is Not the Same as Assimilation

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Khat moved to the United States from Cambodia about two years ago. He had just turned 15 years old. Prior to moving to the United States, Khat and his family lived in a village, outside of the capital city Phnom Penh, which still felt the effects of the Vietnam War and the former Khmer Rouge reign of terror that lasted from 1975 to 1979. Most of the people in his village were farmers. They would go into the capital city in search of work during the dry season when farming was impossible. Schools near his village were unable to attract and retain qualified teachers. Other than work, there was simply little to do. Although the schools were poor and the village lacked basic resources, his family and neighbors valued education and interdependence. After years of planning and preparation, Khat and his family moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to join other relatives who had lived there since 1976. Khat experiences acculturation every day since moving to the United States—a process embedded in the everyday lives of immigrant adolescents.

Migration and immigration are worldwide phenomena of huge proportions. Considering the resulting changes for millions of people, it is quite surprising how little we know about the experience of growing up as an immigrant youth and about the process of creating a new life in a new country. Indeed, understanding the phenomenon of acculturation and the process of adjusting to a new or different culture provides a key entry point into understanding the broader experiences of immigrant youth living in the United States. However, it may be difficult to put acculturation into perspective because it is a pervasive, dynamic, vast, and complex phenomenon experienced differently by each individual.

First- and second-generation immigrant youth constitute 20% of the children growing up in the United States. Therefore, their healthy development has fundamental long-term implications for our society. Immigrant youth undergo a host of changes that may have lasting impacts on their development.

Their journeys follow complex paths, and variations exist in their life courses, the levels of difficulty they experience, and the eventual outcomes. While some youth thrive through acculturation, others struggle to find their balance. Immigrant adolescents, for instance, are likely to experience the conventional challenges of adolescent development as well as the challenges of adjustment in two distinct cultures; the more dissimilar the cultures, the greater the challenge. As discussed in Chapter 16, identity development not only is an important developmental task of adolescence but also is compounded by developing an ethnic identity. For immigrant adolescents, especially new immigrants, the combining of two cultures may be a challenge to personal and ethnic identity development. It is in identity that adolescents base their sense of self and vision for their lives. Identity incorporates adolescents' choices for themselves, their priorities, and the guiding principles by which they make decisions.

Deepening our understanding of the factors that influence the development of the burgeoning immigrant youth population is essential. For example, leisure and recreation environments provide important contexts where immigrant youth may thrive in their development. In fact, these informal environments are often the only places where immigrant youth can flourish, as you will read later in this chapter. Therefore, appropriate leisure and recreation opportunities, services, supports, and programs are important factors that may contribute to the healthy development of immigrant youth. As indicated earlier, understanding the phenomenon of acculturation provides a key entry point into understanding the broader experiences of immigrant youth living in the United States.

Acculturation and Assimilation

An understanding of acculturation begins by establishing what acculturation itself is and what it is not. For instance, acculturation is often understood as being the same as assimilation when in fact acculturation and assimilation are two very different experiences. *Acculturation* refers to the cultural adjustment one undergoes as a result of moving from one cultural context to another. It is a neutral term. Acculturation does not prescribe the direction of change nor does it place value on the types of changes that occur. For example, in Khat's case, he quickly made some friends when he moved to the United States. Instead of Khat becoming more independent and making decisions on his own like his friends did, they adopted his perspective of interdependence and made decisions more collectively as a group. Thus, Khat changed his friends...not the other way around.

Assimilation is different. It suggests that changes occur in a stipulated pattern: nondominant culture¹ changes to the dominant culture,² and right or not, greater value is placed on these assimilative changes. This would have happened if Khat's new friends would have influenced him to the degree that he no longer conferred with his family in his own decision making (a practice he had adopted previously). These differences have significant implications on how we understand the experiences of immigrant adolescents.

The intent of this chapter is to offer an opportunity to develop a deeper appreciation for and greater understanding of the experience of acculturation as it is lived by immigrant adolescents. In the first section, we defined problems created when acculturation is understood as being the same as assimilation. While there has been some theoretical movement toward an understanding of acculturation, in many ways this process of understanding acculturation as a lived experience has just begun. The next section presents findings from a study that describes the experience of acculturation as it is lived by immigrant adolescent females from Mexico. These findings provide an indication of what acculturation is actually like for one group. Lastly, this chapter concludes with implications for the field of youth development. But before turning to the theoretical perspectives, we define key terms.

Definition of Terms

When discussing acculturation, it is important to reach a common understanding of some of the key terms and concepts.

- *Acculturation* is the experience of adapting to a new or different culture. Acculturation is a common phenomenon found in the experiences of immigrants—as well as among the experiences of refugees, indigenous peoples, sojourners, international students, guest workers, and asylum seekers.
- *Assimilation* refers to the cultural absorption of a nondominant person into a dominant culture.
- An *immigrant* is someone who voluntarily comes into a new country with the intention of settling as a permanent resident.
- A *refugee* is different from an immigrant because a refugee by definition possesses a well-founded fear of persecution for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Therefore, fear, rather than a voluntary action, is the motivation behind his or her move to another country.

- *Settling* (i.e., moving to live permanently in the country) is another key distinction that separates immigrants from others (e.g., international students, guest workers, sojourners) who temporarily move to another country.
- Lastly, *culture* is defined as being more than values, customs, artifacts, and institutions (as discussed in Chapter 16). It is a way of being; thinking; organizing knowledge; reasoning; problem solving; valuing the future, past, or present; and relating to others (Mestenhauser, 1998). This definition serves as a framework for how culture is viewed in this chapter. Next, we turn to the theoretical perspectives that have influenced our understanding of acculturation.

Theoretical Perspectives of Acculturation

Various theoretical perspectives have been advanced by those studying acculturation. The classical perspective of acculturation was presented by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, p. 149) who determined, “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.”

So in this definition, although acculturation is a neutral term that suggests change may take place in either or both groups, in practice acculturation tends to induce more change in one of the groups, typically the acculturating group. Moreover, acculturation is typically studied in the context of the individual—rather than the context of a group—and individuals are known to vary greatly in the degree to which they change.

Although the concept of acculturation has been widely used, it has been criticized because its original meaning (as indicated previously) has been lost and it has become synonymous with assimilation. Assimilation suggests that a person from the nondominant culture should change to be like the dominant culture, rather than from dominant to the nondominant culture—thus, perpetuating the assumption that acculturation and assimilation are the same thing. This view prescribes a single directional change for acculturation and gives little room for the process to be understood as a multidirectional phenomenon. It also assumes the dominant culture’s superiority (e.g., being independent is better than being interdependent).

Scholarly attempts to measure acculturation have aided in a clearer understanding of the term, although many variations of its definition exist. For example, some psychological models of acculturation are based on a simplistic

binary (i.e., two-part) conceptualization. That is, acculturation occurs when cultural identification with the society of settlement increases and identification with the society of origin decreases. For example, in the case of Khat, his progress in acculturation could be marked by an increase in his use of the English language and a decrease in his use of central Khmer, the national Cambodian language. These models assume that acculturating individuals will become culturally similar to the society of settlement, emphasizing that movement into the society of settlement will occur. Models based on a binary conceptualization perpetuate the false belief that change only occurs to immigrants and not to people in the society of settlement. These models also assume that immigrants become fully absorbed into the dominant culture—an assimilative assumption.

Other models are more realistic and mirror many reciprocal avenues of change. These multidimensional acculturation models account for several dimensions in the acculturation process (e.g., Mendoza, 1984; Olmedo, Martinez & Martinez, 1978; Szapocznik, Scopetta, Kurtines & Aranalde, 1978). These dimensions could include language and loyalty, whereby language may be lost in the acculturation process but loyalty to one’s society of origin persists. Although multiple dimensions (e.g., language, loyalty, relationships) are recognized, these models still assume that people will be somewhere between cultures on each dimension.

Orthogonal acculturation models specify that identification with one culture may be independent of identification with another, which adds flexibility and a greater range of outcomes (e.g., Cuéllar, Arnold & Maldonado, 1995; Oetting, Swaim & Chiarella, 1998). In this case, Khat could identify with the Cambodian culture and United States culture at the same time. Thus, orthogonal models allow individuals to identify with one or more cultures without assuming a loss in any one culture. In turn, any pattern of monocultural, bicultural, or multicultural identification is possible. Although such models are an improvement on capturing variations in the acculturation experiences, more sophisticated theories are still needed to suit the complexity of the phenomenon.

While far from exhaustive, our review of these perspectives offers general theoretical underpinnings that have influenced our understanding of acculturation. The progression of theorizing has moved from simplistic and generalized understandings to understandings that offer greater complexity and flexibility. However, there is still a tendency to define acculturation as assimilation, which limits an understanding of how an immigrant experiences and influences his or her new environment. This approach also limits the ability to view acculturation as a multidirectional and multidimensional experience and, in terms of immigrants, diminishes the cultural worth found in the society of origin.

In the next section, we describe the experiences of acculturation for one group of immigrant Latina adolescents (i.e., females who identify their heritage with Latin American countries) who moved from Mexico to the United States.

Acculturation for Immigrant Youth

What is the experience of acculturation like for immigrant adolescents? This is an important question because understanding this phenomenon—as it is lived daily—is one of the most important entry points into understanding the broader experiences of immigrant adolescents. Despite the magnitude of this phenomenon, only in the past two decades has research begun to focus on immigrant youth experiences. Prior to that, most acculturation research was based on adult experiences, making it difficult to grasp what this experience is like for immigrant adolescents.

Because of the need to understand acculturation of immigrant youth, and the lack of prior research on the topic, I undertook an investigation that used a phenomenological methodology (Skuzza, 2003). That is, without any prior understanding of the theory that I was testing, I interviewed six immigrant adolescent Latinas who were experiencing acculturation. I was able to use their words to describe how they experienced their daily lives to better understand what acculturation was and how it occurred. The girls were 18–19 years old and had lived in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, from 3 to 11 years. By creating such a large year span, I was able to include preadolescent and adolescent periods in the study participants' lives. The interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

The findings are best described by first looking at the general structure or meaning of acculturation as a whole. Next, I describe constituents, or the essential parts of meaning, of acculturation (see **Table 17.1** for a complete list of constituents). These will give you an indication of how acculturation is experienced in the context of one group of immigrant adolescents.

The General Structure of Acculturation

In Mexico, a familiar way of being had been established and had served as a guide throughout daily life. Upon immigration, what was once familiar no longer existed and other ways of being had to be learned to meet the demands of new cultural contexts. Acculturation was now at the forefront of everyday life accompanying all life activities. It touches the core of one's humanity—that is, one's cultural way of being.

Acculturation is marked by responses to being in a new cultural context, which requires a constant stream of bodily energy to offset the mounting fatigue. Acculturation is not easy; instead, it is just the opposite—a complex experience that requires effort on the part of the acculturating individual. Over time, the level of difficulty lessens as deftness, confidence, relationships, and perspective evolve. Eventually, a settling in occurs whereby the acculturating individual's way of being includes what was learned from life lived in Mexico and in Minnesota. (Skuzza, 2003, p. 79)

What stands out for you as you read this description? Perhaps the primordial nature of acculturation is apparent to you. Maybe you were struck by the notion of a “bodily response to fatigue” from acculturation. Yet, this general depiction also shows that acculturation is a pervasive and complex experience that accompanies all other life events, requiring tremendous amounts of energy on the part of the acculturating individual. The depiction shows that over time, the level of difficulty lessens as competencies and relationships evolve. Consequently, acculturation progresses much more slowly without such supports and opportunities (similar to protective and risk factors and processes in Chapter 6). In time, the acculturating girls' cultural way of being included what was learned from life in both Mexico *and* the United States.

Constituent Descriptions of Acculturation

Like a biologist gazing through a microscope at one human cell, examining the smaller parts of acculturation offers a focused view into the phenomenon's

Table 17.1: Constituents of Acculturation
Skuzza, 2003

- Fatiguing experience requiring a constant stream of bodily energy
- Individual and familial endeavor
- Being confined by space or parental expectations
- Enduring loneliness caused by seemingly insurmountable language barriers
- Feeling diminished by stigmatizing cultural generalizations
- Finding relief and protection in relationships
- Feeling worse and then feeling better about oneself with increased competencies
- Living bodily and relationally in Minnesota and living relationally in Mexico

depths. To help us further understand the meaning of acculturation, we now describe it in terms of its eight constituents of meaning.

Fatiguing Experience Requiring a Constant Stream of Bodily Energy

One notable constituent of acculturation is that it is a fatiguing experience that requires a constant stream of bodily energy. The degree of energy required by acculturation fluctuates depending on the demands of any given situation. It is not an experience one can take a break from or just turn off; instead, it is an omnipresent phenomenon that accompanies all other life events. Immigrants may not get something to eat or find their way around town without dealing with their new culture. Therefore, acculturation often manifests itself in bodily fatigue, signaling that a physical and psychological toll has been taken. This is shown by one girl as she recounted how she felt after living in the United States for nine years:

Because here, I have a feeling of lifeless. I never had negative thoughts before...I felt like...I got anxiety often. I couldn't stand...and I felt like I wanted to die. Like I wanted to die, to disappear. It takes all my energy. And, I felt that. I feel that... and it doesn't erase for a long time. It keeps it there. Like, when I talk about it, you notice that I get angry. I get mad.

Feeling “lifeless” points to the fatigue endured in acculturation. The demands of acculturation drained her by tapping physical and emotional resources. Points were reached where death and disappearance seemed more desirable over the constant drain of acculturation. The fatigue was marked by a growing anxiety as if the girl was trapped in a metaphorical downward spiral. Eventually, the once anxiety-ridden emotions were replaced by anger. To make it through the challenges of acculturation, bodily energy was needed to fuel the inner strength necessary for perseverance, and at times to simply cope with the difficulty of being in a new cultural context.

Individual and Familial Endeavor

For the girls in this study, acculturation was both an individual experience and a collective family experience. The girls were part of families whose lives were intertwined, affecting each others' acculturation in various ways. This process was positive in situations where family members provided support and encouragement for each other. It was also onerous in situations where the acculturation dilemmas of some relatives would compound the problems experienced by other individuals in the family.

Problems associated with having to translate for adult family members seemed to be a common problem for the Latinas we interviewed. Some girls felt burdened by the extent of the translation and the stressful conditions under which the translation occurred—not necessarily the fact that they had to translate. The translation dilemma is one example of how an individual's experience of acculturation is intertwined with, and compounded by, the acculturation issues of others in their family. One girl reiterated a time when she had translated for her uncles in their attempt to buy a car:

They are going to buy a car, I am going to go up there and ask the guy—“Yeah, how much is the car?” And they go, “Well, you didn't do this right!” And I am like... I get so frustrated. That is just me. Until the day I get an attitude because they are like, “You didn't tell him about this!” And I am like, “Was I suppose to tell him? You are suppose to tell me.” I was learning English and they are doing this to me. And inside of me I am like ahhhhhhhh! And my uncles... I felt an obligation to do it. Yeah. And then my mom, if we didn't do it, she was like, “Do it, do it. You have to do it. You have to do it for your uncle because he is your uncle.” Whatever. “You have to give him respect.”

This adolescent was responsible not only for translating for her uncles but also for negotiating a large financial transaction. Pressure was put on her as her uncles pushed her to get the best deal possible. Struggling with her own language limitations, she now had the extra responsibility of using her emerging language skills in this difficult and unfamiliar situation. However, she had to help since she felt obligated and pressured to help her uncles. In another example, the positive side of family is shown in acculturation:

Because I had my family. And because my cousin was there [in school]. Even though the both of us struggled. Both of us had the same weight. None of us had the whole weight against us, the whole school, against you. There was two of us. I could always share what was going on. I always had somebody... that helped me.

For this girl, acculturation was a struggle; however, struggling together with her cousin offered comfort and security. She was able to confide in her cousin and together they could protect each other in school, and this helped to ease the burdens of acculturation.

Being Confined by Space or Parent Expectations

The Latina girls also felt confined by space and parent expectations. Some girls longed for the freedom to move about in their communities as freely as they once had done in Mexico. They had plenty of space in Mexico, including the walking distance between their family home, school, city plaza, church, and the homes of numerous friends and relatives. This large amount of space allowed for childhood freedom and independence to flourish. In Minnesota, the spatial boundaries were dramatically reduced. In their new home, they could not easily get to community places (e.g., parks, schools) or visit friends and relatives living in the area because of the driving distance. Also, the girls' parents felt their new urban neighborhoods were unsafe and therefore placed restrictions on where their girls could go. Essentially, the boundaries were limited to the perimeters of home. In stark contrast to the space and freedom the girls had experienced in Mexico, in Minnesota the girls were confined, and as a result they felt restless, agitated, and trapped.

Some of the girls also felt confined by the gender role expectations placed on them by their parents. They felt their parents unfairly applied rules (e.g., dating, curfew, use of discretionary time) on them because they were females. The girls understood that their parents worried for their safety and therefore were being watchful and protective of them; however, the parents' expectations collided with the girls' need to develop and experience a sense of independence. This type of confinement created greater inner tension than that of spatial confinement and had more dire consequences (e.g., continuous parent-daughter arguments, running away, skipping school). The daughters attributed these consequences to their need to break free from the gender role expectations held by their parents.

Enduring Loneliness Caused by Seemingly Insurmountable Language Barriers

Underlying an immigrant's acculturation is the communication process, of which language is a part. After all, communication is a central and fundamental mode of human learning and expression. You will recall from Chapter 15 that language and communication are important and defining aspects of culture. Language is especially critical for an immigrant who comes from a language base different from that of the society of settlement. Remember Khat? He spoke central Khmer, the national Cambodian language, and some French, but he also had a grasp of the English language. He learned some basic English from NGO (nongovernment organization) workers in his village. So, in addition to his high aptitude for languages, he also had an introduction to

the language before moving to St. Paul and transitioned quite well into fluency (although he may have had difficulties understanding slang words and other informal means of communication).

Many immigrant youth, however, are exposed to a new and foreign language they have never heard or learned before. For the Latina girls I studied, enduring feelings of loneliness caused by seemingly insurmountable language barriers emerged as a predominant challenge of acculturation. One reason for this was that the girls had initial expectations of how well they would understand and grasp English—and this expectation was unrealistic. The gap between reality and expectation was filled with feelings of loneliness that heightened to varying levels, and enduring these feelings became critical to the process of acculturation.

The girls expressed loneliness in two ways: social isolation and personal isolation. *Social isolation* was the result of being unable to adequately communicate with people in English. Especially in the beginning of their acculturation, the girls only felt confident speaking with other Spanish speakers in Spanish, which stunted the development of their wider social network. Moreover, the girls felt like outsiders because they were not able to converse proficiently in English with peers and teachers. Also, in many classroom situations, they felt lonely because they were the only or one of a few Spanish speakers in a particular class. Language became a social barrier.

Related to social isolation, *personal isolation* refers to the loneliness experienced when the girls were alone with their emotions, and it is an inner isolation that results in feeling disconnected from the self. In this case, a deep sense of self-consciousness replaced the loss of personal comfort brought on by language barriers.

In the classroom context, especially, the girls felt increasingly self-conscious, afraid, anxious, lonely, and eventually isolated by language barriers. The girls' grades suffered, and at the same time, they were feeling like outsiders among their peers. The pressure of being a student, coupled with limited English skills, placed the girls in a particularly vulnerable position. Eventually, they lost faith in themselves and discounted the importance of their own life experiences. This loneliness caused them to feel estranged from others, and even more detrimentally, estranged from their own sense of self. Without a strong social network, the personal isolation was perpetuated further and compounded the sense of loneliness felt in acculturation. The following text excerpt depicts the two types of loneliness felt in a classroom context:

I feel uncomfortable because I was the only Spanish speaker who was there. Alone. I was the only Mexican person in the class. I am, right now I am the only Mexican person. It kind of, you don't exist there. They, of course, the teachers know that you are there, but you never ask. I don't ever ask question or

anything. I usually read the book, do the homework, but that's it. I learn by myself. I don't have anyone who says, in my own language, help me or, "Do you understand this?" It's like, I don't have a friend to talk with. It is hard. That's hard because sometimes there are things that you really don't understand anything and you don't have the person to say, "Do you understand?" [Interviewer: So what do you do?] I try and solve the problem by myself. If I can't, nothing. I take a bad grade. That is what I do. I know that it's uncomfortable, but I am used to it. I know I can ask questions, but I feel, I don't feel good to do it. I don't feel like myself anymore. That effort that it takes me to speak out in class is too much.

Not only did this girl feel alone in the classroom, but she also felt *non-existent* in the classroom—an essentially silent and invisible way of being. This deep-seated sense of loneliness diminished her human qualities and contributed to both social isolation and personal isolation. Feeling like one does not matter is a painfully isolating experience. After all, young people, like all people, need to know that who they are and what they do matters. Also, as the only Mexican student in the classroom, this girl was culturally different from others and spoke from a different first-language base. These differences impeded her ability to reach out to others. Feeling silenced and lonely, she opted to deal with her schoolwork alone, which left her even more isolated and diminished her possibilities for learning.

Feeling Diminished by Stigmatizing Cultural Generalizations

Prejudice and discrimination based on culture, class, race, gender and language were at the root of the cultural generalizations experienced by the Latina girls. Such attitudes and actions left the girls feeling diminished—as if they were less human—regardless of whether the attitude or action was intentional or unintentional. The girls indicated that the stigmatizing cultural generalizations made them feel like outsiders and like they were inherently associated with a negative stereotype by virtue of being Mexican.

To illustrate some of the attitudes experienced by these girls, the following text excerpt presents a verbal exchange and its diminishing effects on this one Latina:

It was kind of hard for us [group of Mexican friends] to get along with other kids when they would get mad at us for talking Spanish. And I would get mad too. And I was defending

myself because they did some pretty bad stuff. And oh a lot of like, "You should go back to your country! I am going to call immigration!" And I would be like, "Go ahead! I am legal in this country and you cannot kick me out! Call them! I am not afraid of you!" And stuff like that. I was mad. On the inside it felt worse, like I didn't belong. Unwanted.

This Latina also described how she and other Mexican friends banded together for protection against threatening peers. She was constantly in the position of defending herself from those who diminished her dignity through threatening and diminishing statements. She looked to her Mexican peers for protection against those who elected to exercise their positions of power. Knowing how to protect oneself emotionally and physically became a basic necessity in each school day.

Finding Relief and Protection in Relationships

Human relationships were essential to alleviating the demands of acculturation for the girls interviewed. As discussed previously, acculturation required a constant stream of energy, and throughout the process the girls faced challenging and difficult times. Relationships, in part, alleviated the difficulties by providing safety and comfort. The girls characterized these relationships as having mutual emotional involvement and genuine sense of care, and even more notably, the other person in the relationship possessed an empathetic quality of understanding the uniqueness of being an immigrant. These relationships—whether with a parent, friend, youth worker, or teacher—offered the support necessary for the girls to persevere in acculturation. For example, one girl described her relationship with her father:

Like my dad encouraged me to keep going and never give up so I can get whatever I want. And because there was other people who were like encouraging me to be, like better. And I think that helped me too. Because I was feeling like, ah, there were some who care about me. Yeah. And so, I started doing better. And that is when it [self-esteem] went up. Like, I think of it as I was sleeping and then suddenly I wake up.

Her father's encouragement gave her the support necessary to make it through the difficulties of acculturation. She took stock in this relationship and recognized the important role it played in her life. This steadfast relationship with her father added to her confidence and eventually to the successes she found in her acculturation.

Feeling Worse and Then Feeling Better About Oneself With Increased Competencies

After moving to the United States, the girls experienced an erosion of their self-worth. After time passed, however, gains were made with the help of increased language skills and competences necessary to navigate through their new cultural contexts. Increasing their language skills was important. Once the girls developed a grasp of the English language, other competences began to flourish. As a result, the girls felt better about themselves and began to experience optimism in their eventual ability to live well in a new culture. One girl expressed the positive consequences of her emerging competence:

Yeah, I got used to being here. And my parents gave me a sense to get around and to adjust. I got to know friends and I know other people and I know their culture...and I am used to doing what you guys do. Like to have my time counted. Now I get it. I feel better.

For this girl, developing other competencies in addition to language skills helped ease the process of acculturation. She grew more relaxed and became more comfortable with her new cultural surroundings as her competence increased.

Living Bodily and Relationally in Minnesota and Living Relationally in Mexico

Acculturation is also characterized as an existential experience. That is, the Latina girls lived bodily and relationally in Minnesota, while still living relationally in Mexico. The following excerpt illustrates living bodily and relationally while acculturating in Minnesota:

I don't know. I was kind of depressed or something. Trying so hard to make friends here. While, I was missing something without me knowing. It is becoming a little bit more clear. Like being homesick or something. It is not very much of being homesick for Mexico really. It is the way Mexico is. It is the way the town runs like. And the way you have that freedom to run around without worries.

This girl described a lingering depression that seethed beneath the surface awaiting acknowledgment by her—the person experiencing it. Caught up in the flurry of acculturation, she became absorbed in making friends and finding a social place for herself. She was living both bodily and relationally

in Minnesota. Yet, during this time, deep within herself, she also felt the loss of not being in Mexico. In this case, living relationally was extended to her relationship with how her life had been lived in Mexico. Thus, acculturation is not a neat package of life events that occurs at the onset of immigration. Instead, it is a fluid process of being in two cultures at the same time.

Implications for the Field of Youth Development and Recreation

These eight constituents of acculturation point to areas that recreation and leisure service providers can address to ease the acculturation process. For example, efforts could be made to help new arrivals in this country to learn how to deal with stress and bodily fatigue. In addition, incorporating caring adults and working to foster healthy relationships in service activities could ease some of the difficulties found in acculturation. Leisure is an important developmental context, and here in particular an excellent context in which to help young people develop friendships and feel they matter.

Students, practitioners, and researchers alike may benefit by reflecting on how they may make a positive difference in the lives of immigrant adolescents—one segment of the broad youth population. In the next section, we discuss some of the other implications of the acculturation constituents for people who work or wish to work with immigrant adolescents.

Learning Environments

In recent years, attention has been given to the need for culturally relevant and responsive approaches to youth development. There is a growing realization that practice needs to change to better reflect and serve the changing face of communities. Building intentional learning environments is one way to address the need for culturally relevant and responsive approaches to youth development.

Formal and informal learning environments may happen anywhere at anytime. Besides schools, recreation centers, campgrounds, after-school programs, faith-based centers, and parks are just a few settings that may provide learning environments. The most powerful learning environments are intentionally youth-centered, competence-centered, and assessment-centered (McLaughlin, 2000). In these environments, young people know they matter and are central to all that happens in the program or classroom. They also can learn new, relevant, and challenging things, and they have clear knowledge of when they excel and why they need improvement.

One of the most powerful learning environments occurs in community-based programs, and not necessarily in schools. These environments provide physical and emotional safety, trusting relationships, clear rules and consequences, responsibility of place and program, access as needed, and social capital (McLaughlin, 2000). For the Latina adolescents we have been discussing, these informal learning environments were important. For example, one girl described her fondest memory as an overnight field trip to an environmental camp taken with peers and an adult adviser from a neighborhood organization. Here, she easily made friends with her peers, individuals she never would have spoken to in school or in her neighborhood. In this learning environment, she also developed a trusting relationship with the adult adviser. She had fun teaching her peers and the adviser Spanish words, she learned about environmental issues, and she relaxed and forgot about the troubles she was experiencing in school. The other participants in the study described similar experiences.

Understanding the importance of informal learning environments leads to another point about social segregation. Even multicultural settings, like many urban schools, do not provide the necessary environment for adolescents to develop interpersonal and intercultural relationships among their peers. This is unfortunate, because finding relief and protection in relationships is one way for immigrant adolescents to ease the discomfort of acculturation. Using an example from the interviews, a 16 year-old Latina adolescent shared the following:

It is kind of funny. You go to a classroom. You see mostly all White kids hanging out together and all the minority groups hanging out with each other. Even though the teachers try and separate you. You can't. You just kind of get into this group. And the White kids. Very rarely do you get to hang out with them a lot. Unless you know them from _____ [name of the "token White girl"] and you say hi to them. But you are not as close to them as you are with your little minority group.

Social segregation is a prevalent issue among adolescents. Recreation and other informal learning environments are among few places where the immigrant adolescents have a chance to truly get to know peers who are outside their segregated friendship boundaries (e.g., the adolescent Latina who participated in the environmental camp).

Perhaps, by building intentional opportunities for *all* youth to get to know each other in *all* learning environments, a greater number of healthy intercultural relationships could be fostered among young people. Thus, it is important for practitioners and researchers to consider the factors that could contribute to youth development in such learning and recreation environments.

These factors could include emphasizing the value of informal learning, facilitating time for mutually respectful communication to get to know culturally diverse peers, and designing activities and methods intended to reduce social segregation. After all, having fun together is a great way to reduce social and cultural barriers.

Community-based programs develop learning environments that typically occur during out-of-school time. Nonschool hours can lead to increased risk or opportunity for youth depending on how the time is used. Unfortunately, adolescents typically have fewer out-of-school time programs available to them because too often a heavy emphasis on academic achievement overshadows informal learning opportunities, as discussed in Chapter 13. In turn, adolescents not involved in school activities may have fewer organized youth development opportunities available to them. This is unfortunate because out-of-school time programs offer prime opportunities for adolescents to truly get involved in their own development through recreation. This is especially important to those who are not otherwise thriving in school. These programs also offer unique opportunities for immigrant adolescents—a break in the day when one has the chance to be himself or herself, sort things out, pursue an interest, or find camaraderie.

Practitioner's Way of Being

McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) used the phrase, "First you find a wizard," to introduce a chapter on effective adults who work with youth (p. xv). Adults who possess special qualities that make them successful in working with great numbers of young people are called *wizards* (as discussed in Chapter 12). Adult wizards not only possess certain characteristics, but they have a certain way of being. Wizards know themselves well, are deliberate in how they relate to others, and have certain assumptions about the worth of all people that filter their thoughts and feelings about others. In one of the interviews, a girl described the educators she found helpful:

Not all of them. Yeah, just the ones who know them, who understand the difference. The difference between coming here and living here. They are the only ones who understand the culture maybe, but, at least that there is a difference in cultures. They make all the difference in school for me. It helps so much, having them there.

The wizard educators described in this quotation possess an empathic openness to understanding the uniqueness of being an immigrant. They did not treat all youth in the same way, ignoring the differences that may exist. In

race relations, this attitude is called color-blindness, whereby race is treated like an insignificant factor that does not affect people. The equivalent term culture-blindness could be applied here if the uniqueness of being an immigrant is disregarded. The educators, who chose not to ignore culture and possessed an empathic openness, were sensitive to cultural differences, and integrated this sensitivity into how they related to this girl. In doing this, they extended themselves and made it their responsibility to check in and find out where this Latina needed help in her learning. As a result, this immigrant felt comforted and understood by these educators. Another Latina talked about how one educator worked through language issues:

And then, I just kind of, got to know the teacher, and he was nice. And so I asked him for help. And he said, “Yes, whenever, you want, you ask me for help, and I will help you. If you want to stay after school, I will stay with you.” And yes he is a nice teacher, yeah. And he speaks like Italian and those languages and so he, he told me that’s it is. “Okay that you speak to me in Spanish because I am going to try and understand you because I have some Italian and French and those are similar to Spanish. So I am going to try and understand you.” And so, yes, he is nice. Yeah.

These observations have implications for all practitioners working in the field of youth development. The educator’s approach was welcoming and nurturing and consequently played a key role in fostering a relationship that supported this acculturating Latina. He reached out and engaged this young person, encouraging her to ask questions in Spanish while *he* took the burden of attempting to understand *her*. Think of the amount of time this adolescent spent in the classroom struggling to understand what others were saying. With this special educator, such dilemmas were reversed and she finally had an opportunity to relax in her first language.

Summary

Youth development literature focuses on the strengths youth need to succeed in their lives. Services, opportunities, and supports foster a full range of developmental pathways that may support the growth of youth, regardless of the obstacles they may be facing in their lives. However, to begin fostering positive developmental pathways one must understand the experiences of young people. For immigrant adolescents, acculturation provides a key entry point into understanding their experiences. By uncovering the complexities of this phenomenon, all of us—students, practitioners, and researchers—may develop a deeper understanding of acculturation and what it means to immigrant adolescents. This understanding will enable us to build connections and adequately address positive development pathways in ways meaningful to immigrant adolescents.

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Endnotes

1. According to Berry (1997), *nondominant* is used in place of the word *minority*, which is used by the U.S. Census and social scientists. Nondominant is a term that references the power (i.e., numerical, economic, or political) difference that exists among cultural groups. In this study, nondominant is specifically used to describe people from the following U.S. Census data categories: Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino origin, and multiple race options.
2. According to Berry (1997), *dominant* is used in place of the word *non-Hispanic White*, which is used by the U.S. Census, and the word *mainstream*, which is often used in social sciences. Similar to the term nondominant, dominant references the power differences among cultural groups. In this study, dominant is used to describe people from the U.S. Census data category, One Race: White. European American is also used to describe people from this category.