

Emotional States and Acculturation Strategies of Haitian Immigrants and Haitian Americans in the United States

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ABSTRACT: *This article briefly reviews acculturation strategies used by Haitian immigrants and Haitian Americans in the United States. Each acculturation approach is hypothesized to be linked to specific emotional states. Feelings of shame and anger appear associated with assimilation, pride and contentment with integration, anxiety with marginalization, anger with separation and joy and contentment with transcendental strategies.*

RÉSUMÉ (ÉTATS ÉMOTIFS ET STRATÉGIES D'ACCULTURATION DES IMMIGRANTS HAÏTIENS ET DES AMÉRICAINS HAÏTIENS AUX ÉTATS-UNIS): *Cet article passe brièvement en revue les stratégies d'acculturation utilisées par les immigrants haïtiens et les Haïtiens américains aux États-Unis. Chaque approche d'acculturation est, par hypothèse, liée à des états émotionnels spécifiques. Les sentiments de honte et de colère apparaissent associés à l'assimilation, la fierté et aux stratégies transcendantales.*

Introduction

Adaptation to a new country is determined by an immigrant's experiences in both his own and the host country (Berry, 2005; Berry, 1997). Bringing with him well established and enduring patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, the immigrant immersed in a new culture risks for being confused, at least temporarily, by the demands of a foreign environment whose people think and act in ways alien to him. In attempts to remain functional, he initiates certain behavior patterns, termed

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acculturative strategies (Berry, 2005) that are likely to increase his level of mastery of the new setting and thus increase his comfort level. Through these behaviors, he establishes the extent and the degree to which he values his heritage, culture and identity instead of embracing the ways and customs of the host culture. While psychological factors have been posited to influence that process (Berry, 2005), little attention has been placed on the role of emotions. With a focus on haitian immigrants in the United States, we discuss the emotional underpinnings and feeling states that appear associated with the four identified acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization (Berry, 2005) and one other strategy that we are calling: the transcendental approach.

The ideas presented here are based on clinical observations made during work with patients, social interactions in various contexts and participation and involvement in community activities over the last thirty years. Far from offering a comprehensive treatise, we introduce certain observations and related impressions about the inferred emotional states associated with each acculturation approach. This is not meant to simplify a complex and multi-faceted issue. Rather, it is intended to shed light onto the roles of emotions in the acculturation process and to stimulate further discussions of psychological factors associated with the immigration experience. In addition, by being aware of the emotional states associated with immigrant acculturation patterns, mental health professionals may be better able to establish therapeutic rapport more quickly and thus form deeper working relationship with their clients in a shorter period of time.

Haitians in the United States

There are approximately 915,000 Haitian immigrants and their children in the United States (RAD, 2014). Mostly settled in Florida and New York, the population consists of 576,000 first generation immigrants who were born in Haiti and 339,000 U.S. born, or second generation immigrants, with at least one parent born in Haiti. Most Haitians emigrated between 1960 and 2000 due to a myriad of conditions. Many were pushed into exile, others left due to prolonged political instability, politically induced violence, increased crime rate and limited economic and educational opportunities. Those conditions contributed to safety concerns, expectation of a gloomy future, decreased sense of personal control and increased feelings of helplessness in large segments of the population. All this appears to contribute to a strong sense of resignation to the idea that things are unlikely to change in Haiti anytime soon.

Although immigrating to the U.S. is thought to offer a brighter future, it is also fraught with challenges that will require significant personal sacrifices and both social and psychological changes that could put many at risk for mental health problems or disorders. Increased prevalence of mental health disorders has been noted in immigrants (McIntyre et al, 2016).

Purposes of Emotions

According to Oatley et al. (2006), “emotions are adaptations” (p. 39) and states of readiness to act. They enable us to respond rapidly to events in our environments by reorienting our focus to external threats and opportunities through the physiological tension they generate (Oatley, 2006). In addition, they also contribute to a reprioritization of tasks based on immediate survival values and potential for tension release. This assures not only our survival but our ability to maintain tolerable, or preferably, pleasant physiological and emotional states, as emotions vary in their capacity to evoke either pleasant or unpleasant feeling states. Understanding a person’s emotional states and the parameters of his cultural surroundings facilitates greater awareness of what is important to him and what drives his behavior at any given time.

Emotional States and Acculturation Strategies

Assimilation involves a preference for a culture other than one’s own and adopting its customs and beliefs. Assimilationists appear to be driven primarily by feelings of shame and anger towards Haiti and anxiety about keeping their Haitian origins a secret. They are ashamed of who they are and blame Haiti for having kept them behind, depriving them of education and opportunity and exposing them to humiliating conditions. Those feeling states seem associated with emotionally distressing experiences in Haiti and positively reassuring experiences in American society that contribute to a sense of relief, calm and contentment. There is the sense that in America, everyone is equal and free to affirm their human dignity and individuality. Feeling freed from the constraints and humiliating customs of an ascriptive society, such as Haiti, many enjoy the dignity and acclaims that come with achievement, no longer made invisible by class origins or familial lineage. In those cases, injuries to the self-esteem is treated by embracing American ways and values or those of another ethnic group. Zephyr (2001) refers to them as undercover Haitians. Their preferred language is English as spoken by the ethnic group they have joined. Although generally able to speak French or Kreyol, they do neither, perhaps French, if able and

when interacting with someone from another French speaking country. When dealing with Haitians, they speak English and usually refuse to respond in Kreyol or French if addressed in those languages. In general, for assimilationists English is often the preferred language because it bypasses the negative associations and connotations of poverty or low class that many Haitians associate with Kreyol. Some have reclassified their ethnicity and in some cases their races on their driver's licenses or other documents. They live in neighborhood where there are few or no Haitians they can identify, if they can afford it, and prefer romantic relationships with non-Haitians. Often their assimilation is covered by marrying into a different ethnic group and adopting the culture of that ethnicity. Their children are given English names or the names associated with the preferred ethnicity.

With new criteria for self-worth, they create a new identity by actively obliterating memories of their past. For assimilationists of either first or second born generation, such feeling states are prevalent regardless of social class. Of importance here, is the presence and the weight attributed to past hurtful and emotionally harmful experiences while in Haiti for first generation immigrants and devaluing interactions in America for those of the second generation. A young Haitian man reportedly became so distraught and disturbed after his cover was blown that he committed suicide (AAME, 2010). For many who were driven toward assimilation, having been born in Haiti is a curse and leaving there is deliverance.

On the other hand, Haitian immigrants whose emotions guided them towards integration seem primarily driven by feelings of pride and pleasant memories of life in Haiti. Regardless of former class status, memories of their time in Haiti are usually pleasant and they enjoy sharing anecdotes and recollections of their experiences. While seeming aware of Haiti's limitations and shortcomings as a country, they are usually prepared to take her defense, and generally have a more informed and balanced view of American society and its problems. While holding tightly to their identity as Haitians, they selectively choose what to adopt and reject from America's culture. Showing flexibility, they discard from their Haitian ways what is deemed impractical. They take great stock in Haitian history (Zephyr, 2001) and incorporate the triumph of their ancestors over the French in the 19th century into the foundation of their cultural and personal identity, contributing to a strong sense of efficacy and a staunch sense of self-confidence.

Anonymity is dreaded regardless of class origin, as there seems to be a high need for recognition by other Haitians of their former status and

achievements in Haiti, whether the person was a physician or a Voodoo priest. Of importance here, is that the individual had achieved something important in the eyes of his peers and he is elated when he is able to relate that to another Haitian who can really appreciate the achievement. Based on their upbringing and the level of education attained in Haiti, they prefer to speak either Kreyol or French at home, with those fluent in French using it as an entry test for assessing a fellow Haitian's former class status in Haiti and determining whether an interaction will proceed to friendship. Associating with other Haitians is preferred instead of being with other groups. While they do not avoid them necessarily, their friendships and interactions with non-Haitians seem more instrumental or strategic than emotional. They tend to and prefer to marry other Haitians and usually prefer that their children also marry Haitians. Many, obsessed with developments, in Haiti spend hours listening to radio stations and reading Haitian newspapers. Concerned about the plight of Haitians back home, many have founded charitable organizations to provide educational, medical and mental health assistance. They cultivate and patronize Haitian arts and music. Continuing their traditional religious activities, most prefer to attend mass or services performed by Haitian priests or pastors and many believe that Vodoo provides them with a layer of spiritual and super natural protection that non-Haitians do not have. Being in America is an economic necessity, and just as the African slaves wanted to return to Guinea in Africa, one of their most cherished dreams is to return to Haiti, if not to reside there permanently, at least for vacations on a regular basis. In the meantime, taking advantage of the political stability and functional American institutions, they are recreating Haiti here in America.

Of those who were pushed into adopting a separation approach, fear and anger appear to be at the roots of their adjustment. While not totally clear what the fear is about, it seems associated with change and potential loss of control. More prevalent in men than women, with the women seeming less threatened, in fact appearing to welcome the changes tied to living in America, as it brings them a greater sense of freedom and autonomy relative to the men in their life. Living in America can lead to role reversals and roles switches, which can be associated with decreased power for authoritarian males. With respect to child rearing, both men and women in this group seem equally threatened by outsiders and upset at America for threatening their religious beliefs and ideas about normal and deviant behaviors. American society is too liberal and too intrusive for their comfort. While they enjoy the economic benefits of living in America, they are more interested in preserving their way of life

within American society. For the more educated, the anger is sometimes related to having had to immigrate, which they attribute to historical oppression of Haiti by the United States and the perceived imperialistic role that America is playing in the world. They tend to see this country as excessively materialistic and wasteful at the expense of the rest of the world. Taking offense at any characterization of Haiti as poor and backward, they are quick to point to America's endemic racism. They usually want a Haiti free of external influence and see themselves as working to bring about a more nationalistic and inclusive Haiti. Of interest, immigrants in this group tended to be liberal arts college students and older leftist intellectuals.

A pervasive underlying state of anxiety appears prevalent in those whose acculturation approach is marginal. As individuals, they seem to respond to their environment based on the needs of the moments without any ideational or pre-established cultural mental sets. They appear indifferent to Haitians or Haiti at one moment and infatuated with her at another, with the same pattern also observed with respect to other ethnic groups in America. They seem insecure in both their cultural and personal identity. Many of them immigrated as children, with little or no history of life in Haiti and many were left behind by their parents at an early age, putting them at risk for attachment issues. Moreover, many did not feel welcome by other ethnic peers in America. They were often teased and bullied and had to physically defend themselves at school. Both their cultural and personal identity seems unstable, appearing to merge with the identity of their companions, seeming driven by desires for approval.

A last group that is different than all the others, at least at a superficial level, conveys the impressions that they have transcended culture. Individuals in that group seem primarily motivated by contentment and joy associated with their activities. Contrary to the marginalized group who seems to have no sense cultural identity and a fluid sense of personal identity, individuals in the transcendent group have a well-established sense of their cultural roots and solid sense of personal identity. Unlike those who have chosen integration, they do not clamor about their identity as Haitians nor seem to have the need to be around other Haitians as much as they do. They do not have the rancor of the separatists nor the dread toward Haiti that the assimilationists have. Their personal interests seem to drive their behaviors and interactions. Contrary to the integrationists who seem to develop instrumental friendships with non-Haitians and the separatists who avoid developing any friendships with outsiders as much as possible, the transcendentalists seem to form and maintain close personal friendships across races based on mutual attraction and

likes and dislikes. When talking about people, they tend to describe their behaviors, personality or attitudes, seldom mentioning their ethnicity as is usually the case with integrationists and separatists.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we offer a glimpse of the acculturation strategies and the emotional and feeling states that seem to go with each one. The pride and contentment about being Haitian or of Haitian origin appears associated with immigrants who have adopted integration strategies, maintaining a balance between the new and the old. Those ashamed of their Haitian origin, regardless of the reasons, appear to prefer an assimilationist strategy. Separatists, or those who prefer to avoid any cultural transaction in which there is a selective give and take as in the case of the integrationists, are thought driven more by anger. Those with no apparent cultural anchor, or the marginals, who also seem to have fluid personal identities, appear driven more by anxiety. Lastly, the transcendentalists, those for whom cultural factors seem to have little saliency for their actions appear motivated mostly by feelings of contentment.

At the root of the immigrant's experiences is the search for dignity, personal worth and self-esteem through the actualization of their innate potential. Looking at the adaptation or acculturation strategies free of value judgment, they first come across as attempts to survive physically and emotionally and secondly as effort to decrease inner tension. In other words, the strategies are effort to seek balance between internal desires and the demands of the surroundings.

The presented observations and impressions are relatively sketchy. They lack empirical validation and are only offered to stimulate discussion, promote research and assist clinicians in becoming more aware of the diverse nature of the Haitian immigrant experience. We hope that this will facilitate more targeted clinical inquiries when working with this population.

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