

Review of Cultural Terminology: Addressing Inconsistencies in Cross-Cultural Research



Monica Ramirez-Molina, Joelle Sacks, Alberto Torres-Aragón, Quinn E. Hendershot, Matthew D. Johnson

INTRODUCTION

Inconsistent theoretical frameworks and operational definitions of cultural constructs hinder progress in social science research, affecting diversity, equity, and inclusion policies as well as cultural competence training. Conflicting and ambiguous terminology creates confusion among researchers and impedes knowledge dissemination. To address these challenges, we propose clear definitions for key terms and urge researchers to maintain consistency and precision in their studies of cultural phenomena.

KEY ISSUES

1) Varying Definitions of Key Terms Across Studies

- Berry (1997) defines **assimilation** as abandoning one's heritage culture to fully adopt the dominant culture, emphasizing one-sided adaptation. In contrast, Karimi (2022) describes assimilation as a mutual cultural exchange where groups adopt aspects of each other's norms, leading to a shared cultural experience.
- Biculturalism** may be seen as either an outcome of integration, where individuals maintain their heritage culture while participating in the dominant culture (Berry, 1997), or a separate skill where people learn to switch between two cultures depending on the situation (Phinney et al., 1997; LaFromboise et al., 1993).

2) Overlapping Constructs Creating Conceptual Confusion

- Integration**, a strategy for maintaining cultural identity, is often confused with **biculturalism**, which refers to effectively navigating two cultural environments (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007).

3) Unnecessary Development of New Terms

- Emotional acculturation** (De Leersnyder, 2017) and **cultural identity negotiation** (Bekteshi & Bellamy, 2024) often overlap significantly with previously established constructs such as **psychological adaptation** (Berry, 1997; LaFromboise et al., 1993) and **integration** (Berry, 1997; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

4) Broad Terms Failing to Capture Cross-Cultural Differences

- Applying broad constructs like **individualism** and **collectivism** across cultures without considering nuance results in oversimplification. For instance, Asian collectivism often emphasizes conformity and harmony within large groups (Triandis, 1995; Oyserman, 2002), while Latin American collectivism focuses more on familial bonds and emotional support (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011).

5) Lack of Clear Definitions for Key Terms

- Terms like **dominant culture** and **heritage culture** are often used without clarification, making their interpretation inconsistent and ambiguous (Maruyama et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2020).

SUGGESTED DEFINITIONS

Cultural Terminology	Currently Used Definitions	Reasoning
Acculturation	<p>"Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological changes that involve various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to some longer-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between both groups." (Berry, 2005, p. 698)</p> <p>"Acculturation is a dynamic process that includes the continuous negotiation of cultural identity and cultural practices between individuals and groups" (Rudmin, 2003, p. 4)</p>	This approach emphasizes the bidirectional nature of acculturation, recognizing the role of dominant culture members in shaping acculturative outcomes through their attitudes and structural power. This definition reduces conflation of acculturation with the strategies in Berry's model, including integration, assimilation, marginalization and separation.
Assimilation	<p>Two groups adopting one another's cultural norms and structures through social and marital relationships, eventually leading to a shared cultural life (Karimi, 2022)</p> <p>The abandonment of one's heritage culture in favor of the dominant culture (Zhao & Biernat, 2022).</p>	As one of the four strategies for acculturation (Berry, 1997), assimilation should capture the distinction of leaving one's heritage culture behind and focusing on the integration of the dominant culture as the primary. It is a precise and parsimonious definition of this construct, adhering closely to the theoretical origins of the term.
Biculturalism	<p>"...occurs when individuals maintain their original cultural identity while simultaneously engaging and adapting to the dominant culture..." (Berry, 1997, p. 9)</p> <p>"Biculturalism is the capacity to identify with and integrate two cultures, often measured by examining individuals' ability to navigate and reconcile cultural values, behaviors, and identities from both" (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013, p. 123)..</p>	This definition captures the aspects of navigating between two distinct cultures but ensures those behavioral and psychological aspects. The idea is that biculturalism is the outcome of the strategies proposed by Berry (1997) to achieve acculturation as a whole. This is not to be confused as integration, which is the strategy put in place for the process of achieving biculturalism.

Note. The recommended definitions are presented in **bold**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly define key terms to prevent ambiguity and enhance consistency across research studies. Establishing standardized definitions will improve coherence and validity within cultural research.

Avoid conflating related constructs by maintaining clear distinctions based on established theories. Ensuring conceptual clarity will strengthen theoretical foundations and enhance measurement validity.

Focus on refining and applying established constructs rather than creating new, redundant terminology.

Ensure that broad constructs are applied with attention to cultural-specific contexts to avoid oversimplification. Recognizing cultural diversity will improve accuracy and applicability across studies.

CONCLUSION

We aim to highlight the potential negative effects of inconsistent definitions, overlapping constructs, and ambiguous theoretical frameworks on cultural psychology research. By defining cultural constructs rooted in established theory with accuracy, researchers can ensure consistency across studies, improve measurement validity, and enhance the overall coherence of cross-cultural research. Clarifying and standardizing these constructs is not only essential for advancing research quality, but also for informing evidence-based DEI initiatives and cultural competence training that rely on coherent and actionable knowledge. Future research should prioritize refining and applying established frameworks rather than creating new, redundant terminology, as this will enhance clarity and consistency across studies.

REFERENCES

