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# The neglected role of social comparisons in acculturation: Considering the integration paradox

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The aim of this contribution is to further develop and advance acculturation theory and research by discussing the largely neglected role of social comparison processes. Social comparison is a ubiquitous process that plays a central role in several theories, such as social identity theory, equity theory and relative deprivation theory, and can determine perceptions of discrimination, feelings of entitlement, and acculturation strategies and adaptations. The importance of social comparisons is first discussed in relation to the research on the integration paradox, which finds that higher, compared to lower, educated immigrants tend to perceive more discrimination and distance themselves more strongly from the country of settlement. This research draws attention to perceptions of relative deprivation and the structural aspects of acculturation. Subsequently, the potential of considering comparison processes for examining and understanding acculturation variation across aspects (e.g., behavior, values, identity), life domain (e.g., politics, work, family), and situational context (e.g., assimilative, multi-cultural) is discussed. Furthermore, the implications of social comparisons for assessing and measuring acculturation strategies and adaptations will be considered. It is concluded that acculturation research will benefit from more systematically considering the various comparison processes in which individuals and groups can engage when coming into intercultural contact.

**Keywords:** acculturation; social comparisons; integration paradox; immigrants

"I am less interested in things like our heritage culture than my friends. They are really into being Moroccan while I am more focused on Dutch society" (interview with Turkish-Dutch male, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation).

"I tend to see negative things in Turkey more and compare it with the Netherlands and I always say I'm grateful to live here now" (1<sup>st</sup> generation; Geurts et al., 2021, p. 81).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sustained first-hand intercultural contact affects people's cultural orientations and behavioral patterns, especially among immigrant-origin groups. To successfully function in a new society and to participate in its institutions requires the acquisition of cultural competence and necessary knowledge and skills. As applied to individuals, acculturation unfolds as a dynamic process, involves various types of changes (e.g., practices, values, identifications), different domains of life (e.g., family, school, work), and is situated in an ecological context (e.g., multicultural, assimilative). Acculturating individuals differ in personal characteristics, deal with many types of challenges, and at specific times and in specific domains, settings and societal conditions. There is a great deal that varies a great deal, which has led to the "Specificity Principle in Acculturation Science" stating that acculturation depends critically on what is changing, where, in whom, how, and when (Bornstein, 2017). Further, models such as the Interactive Acculturation Model (Bourhis et al., 1997) and the Relative Acculturation Extended Model (Navas et al., 2005) propose elaborate sets of distinctions for fine-grained analysis of acculturation.

The specificity principle and these models challenge the many acculturation studies that mainly focus on acculturation preferences (also called orientations, strategies, modes) in terms of general attitudes towards heritage cultural

maintenance and mainstream culture adoption and /or contact-participation. Additionally, increased mobility, forms of superdiversity and cultural mixing, the increasing number of individuals with mixed or multiple cultural backgrounds, and the importance of transnationalism makes it more difficult and inadequate to define and assess acculturation in terms heritage and mainstream cultural orientation attitudes.

Furthermore, acculturation is typically conceptualized and measured as a non-comparative process focusing on individual acculturation preferences and the related psychological and sociocultural adaptations. For example, for determining the level of adaptation of acculturating people, researchers compare an acculturating group with another group (e.g., non-acculturating members of the same ethnicity; other acculturating groups), but they do not tend to consider that acculturating individuals are *themselves* engaged in various forms of comparisons, such as interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup comparisons, and can have various motivations for doing so (Zagefka & Brown, 2006). However, the two quotes above illustrate that immigrant-origin individuals make social comparisons in evaluating their own views, societal position and outcomes. Social comparisons can determine perceptions of discrimination, well-being, aspirations, feelings of entitlement, and acculturation strategies and adaptation (e.g., Keum, 2016; Lou & Noels, 2024; Verkuyten, 2018).

People constantly engage in social comparisons and these play a central role in several theories, such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), equity theory (Adams, 1963), stigma theory (Crocker & Major, 1989), and relative deprivation and gratification theory (Guimond & Dambrun, 2002; Smith et al., 2012). For example, within the context of acculturation, social identity theory is concerned with how immigrants define their identity in comparison to members of other groups in the

society of settlement. Equity theory posits that people determine the fairness of their outcomes (e.g., economic position) in relation to their inputs (e.g., qualifications) with the corresponding ratios of referent others. And relative deprivation theory proposes that the perception of unfair comparative disadvantage leads to anger and resentment, reactive ethnicity, negative attitudes towards other groups and less positive attitudes toward the social system, such as reduced confidence in political institutions and higher support for political protest (Rios & Mackey, 2020). Feelings of relative deprivation might also be responsible for the finding that structurally more integrated immigrants (i.e., higher educated, higher socio-economic attainment) perceive more discrimination and more strongly distance themselves from host society and culture. This so-called 'integration paradox' (see Verkuyten, 2016) suggests that comparison processes leading to an appraisal of unfair disadvantage play an important role in acculturation.

The aim of the current perspective article is not to present a new theoretical model but rather to further develop and advance acculturation theory and research by discussing the ubiquitous and neglected role of social comparisons. Several scholars have argued for the usefulness and importance of considering intergroup relations and strategies for understanding acculturation processes and outcomes (see Brown & Zagefka, 2011; Liebkind, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2014). Here, I focus more explicitly on social comparison processes which do not only involve intergroup comparisons but also interpersonal, intragroup, and temporal comparison. I will first consider the research on the integration paradox that draws attention to the structural aspects of acculturation and perceptions of relative deprivation. Subsequently I will discuss various implications of considering social comparison processes for acculturation. The central argument is that acculturation research will benefit from more systematically considering these processes and different

ways for doing so are indicated.

## 2. THE INTEGRATION PARADOX

A phenomenon that has received increased attention in migration research literature is the 'integration paradox' which describes the situation of the structurally more integrated and highly educated immigrants turning psychologically away from the host society, instead of becoming more oriented toward it (Buijs et al., 2006; Verkuyten, 2016). This paradox is mainly examined in relation to level of education but also with various indicators of socio-economic attainment (De Vroome et al., 2014; Geurts et al., 2020; Geurts & Phalet, 2024). Theoretically, the paradoxical nature of highly educated immigrants' disengaging from society is important and interesting. Acculturation research suggests that psychological and sociocultural adaptation tend to be modestly interrelated (e.g., Berry et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2007), and the 'acculturative model of subjective discrimination' predicts that higher education goes along with less perceived forms of discrimination, especially among those who are identifiable based on race and religion (Flores, 2015). The higher educated would be less discriminated against because they are more familiar with local culture and language making them more acceptable to the native majority. Further, segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Zhou, 1993) argues that resource-deprived immigrants (i.e., low educated) will experience more resistance and rejection with acculturation. Additionally, classic (Gordon, 1964) and new assimilation theories (Alba & Nee, 2003) suggest that structural integration (educational and socio-economic attainment) will be conducive to psychological adaptation, such as developing a sense of belonging and a more positive attitude toward the host society.

Yet, education and socio-economic attainment as forms of sociocultural adaptation can also be an obstacle for developing positive attitudes toward majority members and the host society. Research among different immigrant-origin

groups and in various countries has found among the higher educated a lower sense of host society belonging and less feeling at home (Damen et al., 2024; Geurts et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2024), lower national identification (Esaïasson et al., 2024), more negative attitudes toward the majority (De Vroome et al., 2014; Ten Teije et al., 2013; Velásquez, 2024), lower permanent settlement intention (Cheung & Yao, 2022), and reduced trust in national institutions and the political system (Dagevos et al., 2022; Esaïasson et al., 2024).

A key reason for the integration paradox is that higher educated immigrants feel relatively deprived compared to similarly educated majority group members and as a result distance themselves psychologically from the host society, and might even endorse group militancy (Koomen & Fränkel, 1992) and political extremism (Obaidi et al., 2019). Relative deprivation concerns the perception that oneself or one's group is at an unfair disadvantage in comparison with relevant others (Smith et al., 2012). Feelings of relative deprivation contain three aspects. First, there must be comparisons made at the individual or group level. Second, the comparison must lead to the perception that one is at a relative disadvantage with respect to other individuals or groups. Third, the perceived disadvantage should be seen as being unfair. There are at least three reasons to expect that feelings of relative deprivation are higher among immigrants who are more integrated structurally, especially in relation to their level of education.

First, within the relative deprivation framework, it has been argued that the more advantaged members of disadvantaged groups are most likely to engage in intergroup comparisons (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Thus, higher educated immigrants may feel more deprived because they increasingly compare their situation and opportunities with majority members as relevant referents. Higher education has been found to increase immigrants' contact

opportunities and actual contacts with majority members (e.g., Martinovic, 2013), which makes the majority a more salient and relevant comparison group. In addition, compared with similarly educated majority members, immigrants tend to have lower-level employment and more temporary jobs (e.g., Kogan, 2006). Thus, higher educated immigrants may feel more deprived because the relevant comparison with similarly educated majority members turns out unfavorably.

Second, the theory of rising expectations (Gurr, 1970; Runciman, 1966) suggests that immigrants who pursue higher education and try to attain a good position in society develop higher expectations. They, therefore, are more strongly disappointed about unequal opportunities, unfair treatment and lack of acceptance, whereby their higher expectations are not met with equal rewards: "I am an educated person. I had university education. But then you see that neither your diploma, nor your experience in your country are accepted here. They don't accept. And they don't take you in general seriously" (Geurts et al., 2021, p. 80). The higher educated tend to be more sensitive to acceptance and rejection by the majority population and are likely to be exposed to societal discrimination since they consume more national media and have more contacts with majority members (e.g., Schaeffer & Kas, 2023; Van Doorn et al., 2013). In contrast to the lower educated, they can more confidently claim that a lack of opportunities and discrimination, rather than a lack of efforts and skills, prevents them and educated members of their group from gaining economic parity with majority members.

Third, higher education implies higher cognitive sophistication which can mean that higher educated immigrants are more interested in, aware of, and have a better understanding of negative public and political debates, structural processes of discrimination and reduced opportunities in society (Gijssberts & Vervoort, 2009; Kane & Kyyro, 2001; Wodtke, 2012).

Education enables immigrants to become more informed social justice critics who can seek to challenge discrimination and advocate policies that redress group disadvantages.

Various studies have examined whether higher level of education and socio-economic attainment go together with relative deprivation in terms of perceived discrimination, perceived equal opportunities, and feelings of acceptance. For immigrants, perceptions of discrimination and lack of opportunities in the host society combine the different aspects of relative deprivation. When immigrants have the sense of being discriminated against, they will feel that they have an unfair disadvantage relative to members of the majority group, either personally or as a group (e.g., Koomen & Fränkel, 1992; Piccinelli et al., 2024). And when immigrants have the sense that their group lacks opportunities to succeed economically and to freely enjoy their social and cultural life, they compare their position with the opportunities that are open to other groups in society, and the majority in particular. This means that it can be expected that in particular experiences and perceptions of nonacceptance and discrimination, despite one's efforts and achievements, lead immigrants to distance themselves from society. Thus, the more successful ones would be more aware and sensitive to ethnic acceptance and equality, which in turn would drive their disengaging reactions to society (Maxwell, 2009; Portes et al., 1980).

In support of this reasoning, large-scale survey research has found a positive relation between level of cultural integration and education attainment with perceived discrimination among immigrants and minority groups in, for example, North America and New Zealand (Lajevardi et al., 2020; Sizemore & Milner, 2004; Wodtke, 2012). Cross-sectional and longitudinal research in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and China has also provided empirical evidence that the higher educated tend to perceive more discrimination and lower societal

acceptance. This has been found in large samples of, country specific, established immigrant-origin groups (e.g., former labor migrants; Cheung & Yao, 2022; De Vroome et al., 2014; Esaiasson et al., 2024; Ten Teije et al., 2013; Tolsma et al., 2012; Tuppatt & Gerhards, 2021), smaller immigrant groups (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Somali; Van Doorn et al., 2013), recent immigrants (e.g., residents less than two years; Geurts et al., 2020; Steinman, 2019), internal migrants (rural to urban; Cheung & Yao, 2022; Xue et al., 2024), and refugee groups (Damen et al., 2024). Thus, there is among a variety of groups empirical evidence for the higher educated and more successful ones perceiving more discrimination and less societal acceptance, with the related feelings of dissatisfaction and anger (Torstensson, 2021). The findings of a meta-analysis support the credibility of the integration paradox (Schaeffer & Kas, 2023).

### **3. IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCULTURATION THEORY AND RESEARCH**

Relative deprivation theory posits that individuals are more likely to make comparisons with relevant others than with objective criteria. As a result, immigrants moving up in social status (i.e., higher education, socio-economic attainment) can feel more deprived because they are more likely to compare their investments, opportunities and outcomes with those of majority members. Experiences and perceptions of exclusion and discrimination implies awareness of unfair disadvantages compared, for example, to similarly educated majority members, making it likely that the more successful immigrants distance themselves more from the society of settlement.

However, acculturation does not only involve social comparisons with (equally educated) majority members. Research shows that various types of social comparison are made. For example, acculturating individuals compare their situation with the majority group, but also with other immigrant groups, subgroups and individuals within their own ethnic community,



and with circumstances in the past (Verkuyten, 2018). Mexican migrants born outside the United States preferred to compare themselves to other Spanish speaking migrants rather than to English speaking migrants and majority members (Franzini & Fernandez-Esquer, 2006). In response to perceived disadvantages immigrants in Spain were found to engage in temporal comparisons (i.e., thinking about their own past) and favorable social comparisons that contribute to positive psychological adaptation (Maldi et al., 2022). Furthermore, after moving to the city, internal Chinese migrants were found to adopt an urban frame of reference and therefore were more likely to perceive higher relative deprivation than both rural and urban non-migrants, and this contributed to lower levels of happiness (Jin, 2016). And some higher-educated migrants psychologically distance themselves from the host society because they have a more international or cosmopolitan outlook (Geurts et al., 2021, 2022). This outlook makes the majority population, and also people in the country of origin, less relevant as referent others. Additionally, immigrant-origin groups in the U.K. and Germany were found to be interested in temporal and co-ethnic comparisons (in the country of origin and settlement), in addition to comparisons with the majority group (Zagefka & Brown, 2005). Higher interest in the first two types of comparison was associated with lower feelings of relative deprivation, whereas higher interest in comparing with the majority tended to be associated with higher deprivation feelings.

There typically are important cultural within-group considerations with a preference for comparisons with minority co-ethnics over comparisons with the majority group (e.g., Leach & Smith, 2006; Zagefka & Brown, 2005). Differences and similarities in preferences, opinions, attitudes, beliefs and behavior within one's own cultural minority community get a lot of attention in daily life, are much discussed and can lead to hassles and conflicts (Lay &

Nguyen, 1998). For example, it has been found that the perception of discrimination is mainly influenced by ethnic minority peers rather than majority group contacts (Bracegirdle et al., 2023). Further, some immigrants try to distinguish themselves from more separated co-ethnics who are considered to be traditional and rigid and opposed to the host culture and society. In contrast, they can define for themselves a position and future within the new national context, which implies adaptation to the majority culture (Verkuyten, 2018). Similarly, other minority members emphasize cultural heritage maintenance and put normative pressure on co-ethnics who are considered to assimilate or integrate too much (Cárdenas et al., 2021; Cárdenas & Fleischmann, 2023). Immigrants' acculturation orientations are not only determined by the perceived rejection of the host society, but also by the perceived rejection of co-ethnics, and from family and friends in the country of origin (Badea et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2015).

There is a range of individuals and groups with which people can compare themselves and their (sub)group, and there are also temporal comparisons in which one's current situation is compared with the past (Albert, 1977). A colonial past, a history of labor migration, the situation in the country of origin, and a mismatch between one's former social status position and current position in society, may all have relevance for acculturation orientations and adaptation (Maldi et al., 2022; Zagefka & Brown, 2005). Hence, it seems useful to study acculturation in terms of the diversity of comparisons that can be made and the implications that these have for acculturation orientations and psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

Self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) argues that people can comparatively think about themselves at different levels of abstraction. We have a sense of what marks us out as individuals, compared to other individuals (e.g., ingroup members), as members of a particular

group, compared to other groups (e.g., out-group members), and as humans, compared to non-humans. Thus, there can be feelings of individual relative deprivation and group relative deprivation, similar to the distinction between perceptions of personal discrimination and group discrimination (e.g., Hodson & Esses, 2002). Furthermore, every individual belongs to many categories and groups which means that there are various reference groups that can be relevant comparison standards. For example, higher educated migrants can feel relatively deprived because they interact more frequently and compare themselves more often with equally educated majority members, rather than majority members in general. In contrast, the education of majority members is a less relevant standard of comparison for immigrants who are educated in the country of origin or have a low level of education (De Vroome et al., 2014; Geurts & Phalet, 2024; but see Velásquez, 2024).

Different acculturation outcomes can be expected depending on the salience of specific comparison groups and dimensions, as well as the relative importance (e.g., ingroup identification) that people attach to these groups and dimensions. The wealth of potential reference targets in natural settings makes it difficult, however, to make specific predictions about comparison choices. Social Identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that outgroup comparability is determined by perceived similarity, proximity to and frequency of contact, situational category salience, and ingroup identification. Furthermore, downward comparisons (e.g., with lower status groups) would be preferred because of the desire to see the self and the ingroup in a positive light. However, a meta-analysis found in general a strong preference for upward choices rather than for downward comparison (Gerber et al., 2018), and a host of other motives has been suggested as determining comparison choices, such as equity concerns, evaluative accuracy, wanting to belong, and self-improvement. For example,

among ethnic minority groups in Western Europe it has been found that interest in comparisons with majority members depends on the specific situation and prevalent justice concerns (Zagefka & Brown, 2006). Further, in Norway second generation immigrants in higher education not only compare their achievements with the poorer conditions in their country of origin but also with ethnic majority peers. The latter comparison fosters pessimism but also generates educational commitment to prove oneself and combat under-expectations (Orupabo et al., 2020). Comparison targets may fulfil different motives which makes it important for future research to consider the relative importance of various motives that acculturating individuals might have and examine how these determine which targets provide relevant comparison standards.

In addition to comparison motives, the choice of comparison targets is likely to also depend on several other factors. More specifically, a focus on comparison choices and processes might be helpful to understand that acculturation and adaptation often differs by aspects, domains of life, situational context, and status group (Bornstein, 2017). Acculturation theory and much of the research tends to predict adaptation via preferred acculturation strategies and orientations. However, some scholars suggest that we need to explore other processes to explain acculturation outcomes (e.g., Bierwaczek & Kunst, 2021; Ward, 2013) and social comparison processes are most likely to play an important role.

First, not everything changes at a similar rate and in a similar way during acculturation. Behavioral shifts (e.g., speaking a new language) differ from attitudinal changes which in turn differ from identity changes (Ward, 2013). For example, among Korean immigrants to the U.S., differences in their Korean and American orientations across behavioral, linguistic and identity adaptation have been found (Choi et al., 2016), and the same has been observed

among Russian immigrants to the U.S. (Birman & Trickett, 2001; Miller et al., 2009). There are various reasons for why these differences exist, including differential processes of socialization, learning, instruction and opportunities. Further, there is the fact that some things are relatively easy to change and others involve core beliefs and values, or have emotional significance and define one's sense of cultural self (Sam & Berry, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2015). Additionally, however, it is likely that different comparisons are being made when evaluating one's actions, attitudes or identifications. Among young people of Turkish and Moroccan origin living in Belgium it was found that integration was the preferred acculturation orientation for social contacts with the majority and one's minority group, whereas separation was most popular when asked about their majority and minority group identifications (Snauwaert et al., 2003). Similarly, immigrant youth in France and Canada were more likely to be classified as integrated on the basis of acculturation attitudes than on the basis of group identifications (Berry & Sabatier, 2011). It is likely that the individuals and groups that serve as reference others differ for one's choices about how to act, what to think, or how one feels about oneself. Future research could systematically examine this possibility.

Second, acculturation research suggests that there are differences in acculturation behaviors and attitudes across various domains of life (Navas et al., 2005) and these may be explained, in part, by different types of social comparison. For example, it is likely that immigrant-origin individuals more often compare themselves and their group with other societal groups in the public domains of politics and work, whereas co-ethnics are more likely to be important referent others in the more private domains of family relationships and religious beliefs (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003). One may seek to behave and be treated like majority group workmates and also want to maintain origin cultural practices and values as ethnic

community members. Further, research on political acculturation suggests that minority members can use an intergroup competition perspective whereby the gain in political influence and power of another group implies a threat to the influence of one's own minority group (Hindriks et al., 2017). In contrast, research has found that ingroup members are important referent others for evaluating forms of cultural maintenance (Verkuyten, 2018). Immigrants and minority members might choose different comparison targets and make different temporal comparisons when thinking, for example, about their economic and political situation in contrast to thinking about moral values and group loyalties. Hence, the types of social comparisons involved in acculturation might be moderated by domain and this can be examined empirically.

Third, the situational context can have an impact on comparative choices and thereby on acculturation orientations and changes (Geurts & Phalet, 2024). For instance, a more assimilative societal context that defines the majority culture as the norm might lead to a stronger desire for heritage cultural maintenance and make social comparisons with majority group members less likely, especially among minority members who endorse diversity ideologies. In contrast, in a multicultural context cultural minority identities are recognized and supported and this might stimulate comparisons with other groups, including the majority (e.g., Yağmur & Van de Vijver, 2012). It is especially in a more open socio-political context that higher education and increased exposure to majority members go along with more frequent experiences with discrimination (Schaeffer & Kas, 2023). Further, the ethnic composition of neighborhoods and schools might matter for comparison choices with, for example, people living in ethnic enclaves being more likely to make within-group comparisons (e.g., Jeroense et al., 2024). A further example is social identity theory's (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposal that socio-cultural conditions impact on comparison



choices of disadvantaged minority members. Situations in which the social stratification appears to be insecure (unstable and illegitimate) will increase the interest in comparing with privileged majority groups and trying to establish intergroup equity and justice. And in situations in which the system is considered secure (stable and legitimate) people might try to develop a positive group identity by making downward comparisons with other disadvantaged groups.

Fourth, social comparison processes are not only important for acculturation of immigrant-origin individuals but also for examining and understanding majority members' views for what immigrants should do (Piontkowski et al., 2002) and how they perceive majority culture change (Kunst et al., 2021; Zagefka et al., 2023). Research on relative gratification indicates that a situation where one is better off in comparison with others or with the self over time can lead to negative attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Dambrun et al., 2006), especially when elite norms towards immigrants are negative (Postmes & Smith, 2009). Higher relative gratification is consistently found to be associated with greater support for anti-immigration policies: those who feel gratified are more anxious about their future wealth and fear of losing advantage leading them to oppose immigration (Jetten et al., 2015). Further, majority members might consider their group as relatively more entitled compared to minority groups, can perceive their more homogeneous cultural past as being better than the multicultural present, and can develop feelings of resentment in relation to perceived preferential treatment of immigrants in the distribution of government services and resources, such as public housing (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2013).

Feelings of relative gratification might also play a role in comparisons and relations between immigrant-origin groups. For example, one can feel better off compared to other immigrants but fear to lose this relative advantage

leading to negative reactions towards other immigrants. Established immigrant-origin groups have been found to derogate and discriminate newly immigrated Arabs in the United States (Kumar et al., 2015), and upward mobile Chinese immigrants can experience prejudice and discrimination from African Americans (Kasinitz et al., 2002).

#### 4. METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The measures used in acculturation research do not tend to consider possible comparisons that individuals make in evaluating their acculturation orientations and psychological and sociocultural changes (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2014). Typically, people are asked to indicate the degree to which they prefer, find important or are engaged in heritage culture maintenance and host society adaptation. For example, they are asked to indicate their agreement with statements such as "It is important to adapt to the culture and values of the host society", "I often participate in my heritage cultural traditions", and "I find it important to have majority group friends".

Yet, research on relative deprivation and social comparison indicates that people make interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, and temporal comparisons. Further, there are upward, downward and lateral comparisons, and various motives driving comparative choices (e.g., self-enhancement, self-improvement, equity). In acculturation research, measures of perceived acculturation preferences and expectations have been proposed, for example, assessing whether immigrants think that the host society wants them to adopt the majority culture and/or maintain their minority culture (e.g., "Most Britons would like Pakistanis to adapt to British cultural traditions and not maintain those of their own", Kunst & Sam, 2013; see Brown & Zagefka, 2011). However, these measures do not explicitly focus on social comparison processes and future research could try to develop scales for the different comparisons that people can make

between themselves and their group with different referent others.

There are various possibilities for considering social comparisons in acculturation measures. For instance, comparative rating measures can be used on which immigrants rate themselves in relation to specific referent others (e.g., co-ethnics, other minority groups), for example, on preferences for heritage culture maintenance and for social contacts with majority group members. Further, people can be asked to rate their frequency of comparison with referent others on specific characteristics and traits (e.g., “in terms of your cultural values”, “in terms of your typical behaviors”, “in terms of social identifications”; e.g., Keum, 2016). Additionally, temporal comparisons can be assessed by asking to compare one’s current and past situations (e.g., ‘Compared with the past, my situation is better than before’; Maldí et al., 2022). Further, the rank-order paradigm (Gruder, 1977) offers participants a selection of comparison targets that vary in their preferences and evaluations, or ask participants to rank their own situation with that of similar others (e.g., equally educated). It is also possible to use free-response measures that monitor all the comparisons that individuals tend to, or as they occur in natural settings, such as the various comparisons that immigrants make in work contexts and in local situations (e.g., Brown & Haeger, 1999; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

Longitudinal research can be used for investigating how and why comparison targets change over time and how this affects various acculturation outcomes. For example, recent immigrants might gradually compare themselves less with co-ethnics and more with majority group members, and following the ‘integration paradox’ this might result in higher perception of being discriminated against (Geurts et al., 2020). And longitudinal data showed that German-born Turks felt more discriminated against after their German language skills and national identification

increased, most likely due to rising aspirations for equality and a greater sensitivity to unequal treatment (Diehl et al., 2021).

Furthermore, it is possible to use experimental designs for examining systematically the importance of different referent others for acculturation orientations and outcomes. For example, comparison choices can be manipulated by using scenarios in which immigrant participants are asked to indicate their feelings and views in comparison to co-ethnics or rather to majority members, or to equally educated or rather lower educated majority members. An experimental survey study examining the ‘integration paradox’ found that (compared to a control condition) raising awareness of unfair German labor market practices elicited higher perceived personal and group discrimination among immigrants (Schaeffer & Kas, 2024). It can also be examined whether immigrants make different comparisons depending on the specific social identity that is made salient experimentally. For example, Thai female marriage migrants felt significantly more discriminated against when asked to think about their intersectional identity of being a Thai woman than when thinking about their Thai identity or their female identity (e.g., Manassen & Verkuyten, 2018). This finding was aligned with interview data that indicated that respondents were more prone to talk about being discriminated against in society when asked what it means to be a Thai woman compared to being a Thai or being a woman.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Cultural globalization and continuing migration have made acculturation an important area of study. This has resulted in an increasing number of empirical studies, meta-reviews, alternative theoretical models, conceptual rethinking, and critical comments (e.g., Bierwiazek & Kunst, 2021; Bornstein, 2017; Kunst, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2010). Acculturation is a complex and dynamic process of change that depends on many factors and conditions, can

start at different points in time and at different ages, and can manifest differently across aspects, life domains, situations, and individuals and groups. There is a great deal that varies, but there are also more general underlying mechanisms initiated by intercultural contact.

The goal of this perspectives paper was to draw attention to social comparison processes that are largely ignored in acculturation research (e.g., Lou & Noels, 2024; Maldí et al., 2022). Social comparisons are a fundamental mechanism influencing people's experiences, evaluations, and behavior and the integration paradox with the underlying feelings of relative deprivation illustrate the importance of social comparisons for the ways in which immigrant-origin individuals orient themselves to their heritage culture and country of settlement. Social comparisons can determine perceptions of discrimination, feelings of entitlement, and acculturation strategies and outcomes.

Research shows that people constantly engage in social comparisons (Crusius et al., 2022). They compare themselves and their situation with others for evaluating their abilities, views, attitudes, and beliefs. Feelings of relative deprivation (and gratification) depend on the individual and group comparisons that people make. Social and temporal comparisons are common and in naturalistic settings there tends to be a range of potential referent others. Individual's orientations to different cultural groups and new cultural patterns develop in comparisons with other individuals and groups, in various situational contexts, and for different aspects and domains of life.

I have discussed several possible implications of considering social comparison processes in acculturation research. Future research should empirically investigate these and other possible implications for acculturation among different individuals and groups, and in various context. For example, the relative importance of different motives and forms of social comparisons for acculturation orientations and

adaptations could be examined. Furthermore, it would be useful to try to make specific predictions about comparison choices and related acculturation outcomes that can be tested empirically. However, this might be challenging considering the range of comparison choices, different theoretical perspectives proposing different motives (e.g., 'enhancement', 'equity', 'improvement'), and various moderating conditions (e.g., diversity ideologies; aspects; domains of life; group identification) guiding comparison (Rios & Mackey, 2020; Zagefka & Brown, 2006). Additionally, considering social comparison processes also has methodological and measurement implications. For example, preferred acculturation orientations and adaptation can be assessed in relation to various referent others that people tend to compare themselves and their group with.

In conclusion, research on the 'integration paradox' indicates that acculturation research will benefit from more systematically considering the various comparison processes when coming into intercultural contact. A focus on these processes has implications for theory, methodology and measurement, and might help to make sense of disparate findings in acculturation research. Social comparison processes have implications for the design of investigations and might explain adaptation outcomes, beyond individual acculturation strategies and orientations that tend to be central in much acculturation research.

## 6. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no competing interests.

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