

COMMENTARY | SPECIAL ISSUE: ACCULTURATION REIMAGINED

Why longitudinal is not developmental: Clarifying misconceptions in acculturation research – A response to Berry (2025)

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In his commentary on the special issue *Acculturation Reimagined*, Berry (2025) questions our proposal that acculturation research could benefit from a developmental perspective, suggesting that such a perspective is already well established. In this response, we acknowledge that developmental ideas have long been part of acculturation research and do not claim originality for introducing them. However, we contend that merely acknowledging the value of developmental approaches, citing classical developmental theories, or relying on longitudinal designs does not realize its full potential. Indeed, one of the gravest misconceptions in the field is the assumption that measuring individuals over multiple time points is equivalent to adopting a developmental perspective. Instead, the next and much-needed step is a genuinely developmental–acculturation perspective with explicit conceptual and methodological integration—one that captures continuity and change across the lifespan and situates acculturation within broader developmental considerations. Our article elaborates such developmental concepts and includes, for instance, how developmental and acculturation stages are intertwined or how time in acculturative processes can be conceptualized. We illustrate how such considerations can be implemented in acculturation research, with the goal of more integrative empirical work that promotes a deeper understanding of cultural adaptation processes across the lifespan.

Keywords: acculturation, cultural adaptation, development, lifespan, longitudinal

1. CLARIFYING MISCONCEPTIONS

In his commentary on the special issue “Acculturation reimagined”, Berry (2025) dismisses our (Titzmann & Jugert, 2024) suggestions for how acculturation science could profit from a developmental perspective, arguing that we have ignored how extensively developmental psychology has already informed the field. To support his criticism, he cites earlier theories (Erikson, Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner) that have informed acculturation research as well as the fact that longitudinal studies exist. We would like to respond to his criticism and to clarify our point of view because we believe that a developmental science perspective has the potential to substantially improve acculturation science by contributing a nuanced understanding of time and the interaction and co-action of acculturation and development.

First of all, however, we want to point out that we are by no means the first to bring a developmental perspective into the field of acculturation research, nor did we claim this. To do justice to the pioneers of developmentally informed acculturation research, we note that developmental perspectives on acculturation date back to Ramirez (1983) and Schönplflug (1997), and the first elaborated conceptual model of acculturation development was presented by Motti-Stefanidi et al. (2012), including Berry as a co-author. We probably should have clarified that the aim of our contribution was not to provide a review of existing methods, approaches, or theoretical conceptions of a developmental acculturation perspective (for this see Juang & Syed, 2019; Oppedal & Toppelberg, 2016; Ward & Szabó, 2023). Instead, we wanted to provide concepts that can be utilized by acculturation scholars to develop novel and more dynamic perspectives on acculturation, which can be more or less easily implemented in research programs.

Berry's response reflects two common misunderstandings among acculturation scholars

about what a developmental perspective is. The first is related to the question of how development is conceptualised. The second refers to the question of how change can be measured. In the following, we will elaborate on both.

2. WHAT DOES A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON ACCULTURATION MEAN?

To answer what a developmental perspective on acculturation entails, we first need to distinguish conceptualizations of development. In developmental psychology a narrow and an expanded concept of development can be differentiated. In the narrow view, development is considered as a series of progressive steps or stages, unidirectional and geared towards a state of maturity. Developmental progression in this conception is supposedly irreversible and universal or normative, i.e., the same for everyone. This narrow conceptualization is incorporated into standardized developmental testing procedures that are utilized, for instance, to inform the design and implementation of support interventions. To some extent, acculturation theories reflect similar approaches, e.g., Oberg's (1960) U-Curve or Gonsalves' (1992) stages of cultural adjustment, which both assume typical adjustment processes.

An expanded concept of development considers the whole lifespan, includes both *universal* and *differential* development, moves away from a narrowly defined concept of maturation to include sustainable changes (including dealing with losses and impairments), and departs from the idea of 'normative' development to include specific constellations or dispositions that can involve developmental deficits or challenges. This expanded concept of development searches for explanations for continuity (stability) and discontinuity (innovation) in emotions, cognitions and behaviour. In acculturation research, this wider conceptualization offers a lens through which acculturation phenomena become more contextualized, diverse, and

dynamic, as it offers explanations of different trajectories. Such a perspective can, for example, describe why acculturation processes differ between children, adolescents, and adults: Different age groups are confronted with different developmental tasks which can accelerate or decelerate specific adaptation processes (Jugert & Titzmann, 2020; Motti-Stefanidi, F., Berry, J., Chrysoschoou, X., Sam, D. L., & Phinney, J., 2012). In both the narrow and the wide conceptualization of development, longitudinal assessments are required to assess change. This is a long-established understanding in developmental psychology, one that also has been repeatedly called for within acculturation research to measure acculturation-related change (Fuligni, 2001; Kunst, 2021). However, it is one of the gravest misconceptions in the field that measuring individuals over multiple time points is equivalent to adopting a developmental perspective. A developmental perspective is foremost a conceptual question and not one about measurement. Of course, it is true that purely cross-sectional designs, which still dominate acculturation research, do little to improve our understanding of acculturation development.

All of these considerations have been expressed—more or less explicitly—within acculturation research, and we never intended to claim exclusive credit for these ideas. However, in our view, merely acknowledging the need for a developmental perspective, referencing a developmental theory, or reducing a developmental approach to the use of multiple measurement points does not make full use of its potential. Instead, we argue that acculturation science would benefit from conceptual and methodological guidelines embedded within a genuinely developmental–acculturation perspective. This constitutes the next, and much-needed, step.

Our article elaborates such conceptual considerations and illustrates how they can be implemented in acculturation research to facilitate

the emergence of further empirical work. For instance, the concept of acculturation tempo, inspired by developmental approaches to puberty, may shed light on interindividual differences in the duration of typical stages such as the “honeymoon phase,” “homesickness,” or “culture shock” (Cushner et al., 1986; Oberg, 1960). Examining interactions between developmental and acculturative changes—drawing, for example, on life-stage or phase-transition perspectives—can offer a contextualized and developmentally embedded understanding of acculturation processes. This represents an empirical route toward implementing the specificity principle in acculturation research (Bornstein, 2017).

Taken together, our suggestions may contribute to a more dynamic understanding of acculturation—one that informs the design of longitudinal studies, enables clearer predictions of change processes, provides a rationale for optimal spacing of assessments (shorter intervals for groups that adapt more rapidly vs. longer intervals for groups with slower adjustment), and clarifies how external processes shape trajectories of change. Ultimately, such an approach would bring us closer to the core aim of acculturation research: examining the complexity of acculturative changes over time.

3. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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