

# Acculturation: Understanding Cultural Adaptation

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November 3, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammed looti (2025). *Acculturation: Understanding Cultural Adaptation*. Psychepedia.  
Retrieved from <https://psychepedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=18452>

## Defining Acculturation Expectations

Acculturation expectations represent the set of beliefs, attitudes, and desires held by both minority (immigrant) groups and majority (host) groups regarding the desired trajectory and outcome of the acculturation process. These expectations are fundamentally distinct from acculturation strategies, which refer specifically to the behaviors and choices enacted by the minority group in their effort to adapt. While strategies describe what people **do**, expectations define what people believe **should happen**, establishing a normative framework for intergroup relations and cultural maintenance or adoption. The study of these expectations moves the focus beyond the individual psychological adaptation of the newcomer and squarely into the realm of societal dynamics, emphasizing the reciprocal nature of cultural contact and change.

The core significance of studying acculturation expectations lies in their predictive power concerning intergroup harmony and individual adjustment. When the expectations of the minority group regarding their acceptance and ability to maintain their heritage culture align with the expectations and policies of the host society, outcomes tend toward positive adaptation and integration. Conversely, a substantial mismatch, known as acculturation discordance, often fuels intergroup conflict, increases experiences of discrimination, and exacerbates acculturative stress for the newcomers. Understanding these mutual expectations is therefore critical for developing effective public policies aimed at fostering social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies, highlighting the necessity of considering the perspectives of all groups involved in the contact situation.

Historically, early models of acculturation often focused unilaterally on the adaptation process of the immigrant, implicitly assuming that assimilation into the dominant culture was the expected and necessary outcome. Modern psychological approaches, however, recognize that expectations are bidirectional and multifaceted, acknowledging that the host society itself holds powerful and often formalized views about how newcomers ought to behave, adapt, and contribute. These expectations are not monolithic; they vary widely based on factors such as perceived cultural distance, economic climate, perceived threat to national identity, and the specific sociopolitical history of the host nation. Furthermore, within any single host society, different subgroups--such as policymakers, educators, and the general public--may hold vastly divergent expectations regarding the ideal acculturation pathway.

## The Conceptual Framework: Berry's Model Revisited

The most widely utilized theoretical framework for understanding acculturation expectations is derived from John Berry's bidimensional model, which, when applied to the majority group, allows for the categorization of host society attitudes toward minority group adaptation. This model utilizes two primary axes: the extent to which the host society expects the minority group to maintain their

cultural identity (Cultural Maintenance) and the extent to which the host society expects the minority group to establish relationships with the host society (Contact and Participation). The intersection of these dimensions yields four distinct acculturation orientations that the host society may expect or prefer from the newcomers, directly shaping the social environment they encounter upon arrival.

The four derived expectations include **Integrationism**, **Assimilationism**, **Segregationism**, and **Exclusion/Marginalization**. Integrationism, often linked to policies of multiculturalism, is the expectation that newcomers will maintain their heritage culture while actively participating in the larger society. Assimilationism demands that the minority group completely shed their original cultural identity in favor of adopting the norms and values of the host society. Segregationism is the expectation that minority groups will maintain their heritage culture but limit their contact and involvement with the host society, often enforced through physical or institutional barriers. Finally, Exclusion or Marginalization represents the most detrimental expectation, where the host society expects neither the maintenance of the heritage culture nor meaningful participation in the host society, often resulting in systemic discrimination and marginalization.

These host expectations are frequently referred to in the literature as 'acculturation ideologies' or 'acculturation preferences' of the majority group, serving as powerful societal norms that dictate the acceptable range of behaviors for immigrants. It is essential to recognize that these orientations are often hierarchical in practice; in many Western nations, assimilationist expectations tend to be the default preference of the majority public, particularly during times of economic instability or perceived national security threat. Conversely, official government policies might formally endorse integrationism or multiculturalism, creating a potential tension between institutional expectations and the expectations held by the general populace, a phenomenon that significantly complicates the adjustment process for minority individuals.

## Expectations of the Host Society

The expectations held by the host society are not merely passive opinions but active forces that shape immigration policies, institutional practices, and daily intergroup interactions. These expectations are heavily influenced by the majority group's perception of the relative status and threat posed by the incoming group. If the incoming group is perceived as economically competitive or culturally incompatible, host expectations are likely to shift toward assimilation or even segregation, reflecting a desire to protect the perceived integrity or resources of the dominant culture. Conversely, if the immigrant group is viewed as contributing necessary skills or labor without posing a cultural threat, expectations may lean toward integration, allowing for biculturalism.

A significant factor in host expectations is the concept of **perceived fit**, which refers to the degree

to which the host society believes the values, norms, and behaviors of the newcomers align with their own. High perceived fit generally leads to more welcoming and integrationist expectations, while low perceived fit often triggers assimilationist demands or outright exclusionist attitudes. Furthermore, these expectations are often disseminated and reinforced through powerful societal mechanisms, including mass media representations, educational curricula, and public rhetoric used by political leaders. When media narratives consistently frame immigrant groups as problems or burdens, the general public's expectations become less tolerant of cultural differences and more demanding of unilateral adaptation.

It is crucial to distinguish between normative expectations and descriptive expectations within the host society. Normative expectations concern what the host society believes newcomers *should* do (e.g., "They should learn our language immediately"), while descriptive expectations concern what the host society *predicts* newcomers will do (e.g., "They will probably stick to their own kind"). While normative expectations drive policy and public discourse, descriptive expectations often fuel stereotypes and influence daily social interactions. When the descriptive expectation is negative--for instance, predicting that newcomers will engage in segregation--it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading the host society to enact behaviors (such as avoidance or discrimination) that inadvertently push minority groups toward separation.

## Expectations of the Immigrant Group

Minority groups also arrive in the host country with a specific set of acculturation expectations, often formed long before migration based on information gleaned from media, diaspora communities, or previous visitors. These expectations pertain both to their own desired cultural maintenance and participation (their strategies) and, crucially, to the anticipated acceptance and treatment they expect to receive from the host society. If immigrants expect a high degree of tolerance and opportunity for biculturalism, they are more likely to pursue an integration strategy. If they anticipate significant discrimination or pressure to abandon their heritage, they may shift toward separation or marginalization as protective mechanisms.

The expectations of the immigrant group are profoundly influenced by motivational factors, including the reasons for migration (e.g., economic opportunity versus political refuge). Economic migrants often arrive with strong expectations of social mobility and are generally more willing to adopt assimilationist strategies if they perceive this path as necessary for success, though they still expect reciprocal acceptance from the host. Refugees, having often fled persecution, may initially prioritize survival and group cohesion, leading to stronger initial separationist expectations, though their long-term expectations often shift toward integration once safety is established. The gap between pre-migration ideals and post-arrival reality is a major source of acculturative stress.

Furthermore, the minority group's expectations are dynamic and change over time and across

generations. First-generation immigrants may hold strong expectations regarding cultural maintenance, anticipating that their children will uphold heritage traditions. However, subsequent generations, having been socialized primarily within the host society's institutions, often develop expectations that prioritize social participation and cultural blending, leading to internal family conflict. When the immigrant group's expectation of integration is met with a segregationist or assimilationist expectation from the host society, it results in a perceived rejection, which can lead the minority group to retreat into separation as a defensive response against perceived discrimination, fundamentally altering their long-term acculturation trajectory.

## The Dynamics of Concordance and Discordance

The interaction between the acculturation expectations of the host society and the acculturation strategies of the minority group creates the dynamic known as concordance or discordance, which is the primary determinant of successful intergroup relations. **Concordance** occurs when the strategies preferred by the minority group align with the expectations of the majority group. For example, if a minority group seeks integration and the host society expects integration, the likelihood of positive outcomes, mutual respect, and social cohesion increases significantly. Concordance minimizes friction and maximizes the efficiency of the adaptation process.

Conversely, **Discordance** arises when there is a misalignment. The most common form of discordance involves the minority group desiring integration (maintaining culture while participating fully) but encountering assimilationist or segregationist expectations from the host society. This mismatch is psychologically damaging because it translates the immigrant's effort to adapt into a perceived failure or rejection. For instance, if an immigrant attempts to maintain their language and culture (integration strategy) but is met with hostility and pressure to 'become fully X' (assimilationist expectation), they experience profound stress and perceived discrimination, leading to negative emotional and psychological outcomes.

Research on concordance highlights that the most stressful and detrimental forms of discordance occur when the host society expects assimilation or segregation, while the minority group desires integration. This specific mismatch is strongly linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and social isolation among newcomers, demonstrating that the quality of the receiving environment, defined by its expectations, is paramount to psychological adjustment. Understanding the patterns of concordance and discordance allows researchers and practitioners to pinpoint specific areas of intergroup tension and design targeted interventions aimed at mediating conflicting expectations, often requiring the host society to adjust its rigid demands for unilateral change.

## Antecedents and Influencing Factors

Acculturation expectations are not formed in a vacuum; they are products of deep-seated

historical, economic, and political antecedents. One primary antecedent is the host country's **national ideology** regarding diversity. Countries with a strong history of promoting multiculturalism (e.g., Canada or Australia) tend to exhibit more integrationist expectations, whereas nations emphasizing a singular, unified national identity often lean heavily toward assimilationist demands. This national context provides the foundational framework upon which individual and institutional expectations are built.

Economic factors represent another powerful influence. During periods of economic decline, high unemployment, or perceived resource scarcity, host society expectations tend to become more restrictive and hostile. Immigrant groups may be scapegoated, leading to heightened segregationist or exclusionist expectations driven by perceived economic threat. Conversely, when the economy is robust and there is a clear demand for immigrant labor, expectations often soften toward integration, provided the newcomers fill specific labor gaps without threatening the social status of the majority. This relationship demonstrates how material conditions can quickly override abstract ideals of tolerance.

Furthermore, the perceived **cultural distance** between the host society and the minority group significantly influences expectations. The greater the linguistic, religious, and historical differences perceived by the majority group, the more likely they are to hold assimilationist or segregationist expectations, viewing the required adaptation as too steep or the cultural differences as irreconcilable. Finally, intergroup contact quality plays a vital role; positive, meaningful contact between members of the majority and minority groups can reduce prejudice and foster more positive, integrationist expectations, while limited or negative contact reinforces existing stereotypes and pushes expectations toward separation or exclusion.

## Policy Implications and Institutional Expectations

Government and institutional policies serve as formalized expressions of host society acculturation expectations. Policies regarding language requirements, citizenship pathways, religious accommodation, and educational curricula explicitly communicate the acceptable boundaries of cultural maintenance and participation. For example, a policy that mandates immediate and exclusive use of the host country's language in all public spheres signals a strong assimilationist expectation, regardless of any rhetorical commitment to diversity.

Multiculturalism policies, where officially adopted, represent an institutional expectation of integration, aiming to support the maintenance of heritage cultures while simultaneously promoting full participation in the national life. However, the effectiveness of these policies often depends on their implementation and the degree to which they are supported by the general public. If institutional integrationist expectations clash severely with public assimilationist expectations, the policies may fail to translate into positive daily experiences for minority groups, resulting in policy

skepticism and increased intergroup cynicism.

Institutional expectations also manifest in sectors such as healthcare, employment, and law enforcement. If healthcare systems fail to provide culturally sensitive services or if employment sectors impose barriers based on foreign credentials, these actions communicate an implicit expectation of marginalization or exclusion, even if official government policy states otherwise. Therefore, policy analysis must go beyond stated goals to examine the practical, everyday expectations embedded within institutional structures, as these are the expectations that directly impact the daily reality and long-term adjustment of immigrants.

## Psychosocial Outcomes of Expectation Mismatch

The alignment or misalignment of acculturation expectations is a powerful predictor of psychosocial outcomes for both the minority individual and the broader society. When individual strategies align with host expectations (concordance), minority members report higher levels of psychological well-being, greater life satisfaction, and lower acculturative stress. This positive outcome is primarily attributed to the experience of belonging and the absence of discrimination, confirming the individual's value within the new society.

In contrast, severe expectation discordance, particularly when the host society rejects integration in favor of assimilation or segregation, leads to detrimental psychological outcomes. Individuals facing this rejection often report heightened feelings of alienation, depression, and social anxiety. The constant pressure to change one's identity or the experience of systemic exclusion requires significant psychological resources, leading to exhaustion and chronic stress. Furthermore, discordance can lead to a phenomenon known as reactive separation, where the minority group, feeling rejected by the majority, actively reinforces separationist strategies as a means of self-protection and cultural resilience.

On a societal level, persistent discordance erodes social cohesion and trust between groups. When the majority group consistently perceives the minority group as failing to meet assimilationist expectations, it increases prejudice and support for restrictive policies. When minority groups perceive that their efforts toward integration are systematically rejected, it fosters resentment and reduces their motivation for future participation. Therefore, the negotiation and management of acculturation expectations are not merely academic exercises but essential components of promoting inclusive societies and ensuring the long-term mental health and successful adaptation of all citizens.