JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL & COMMUNICATION INTERACTIONS RESEARCH

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Belonging as a Key Outcome of Interactive Acculturation in Multicultural Societies

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Abstract: Multiculturalism has long served as a standard for intercultural tolerance, yet it is increasingly viewed controversially. I demonstrate that *liberal multiculturalism* is sustainable as a means of promoting a sense of belonging experienced by both minority and majority groups. Moreover, given recent challenges to the integration hypothesis and the case for acculturation as a mutual process between majority and minority groups, I recommend that interactive models of acculturation strategies be used to identify characteristics of adaptive acculturation, with a sense of belonging among both majority and minority groups being an essential acculturation outcome. I then describe two frameworks for conceiving and assessing belonging: social markers of acceptance and my framework of workplace belonging in intercultural contexts. I further detail how such approaches may be used to clarify degrees of belonging for immigrants in their receiving societies, the extent of openness to such belonging among receiving society members, and the senses of belonging of both majority and minority cultural group members in their workplaces. Future research avenues are proposed, primarily in the form of studies that clarify the relationship between mutual, interactive acculturation and belonging.

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Keywords: acculturation strategies, acculturation and belonging, integration hypothesis, immigrant belonging, interactive acculturation models, multiculturalism, social markers of acceptance, national identity

Introduction: Diverging Definitions of Multiculturalism

In nations spanning the globe, we are witnessing increasing sociopolitical polarization. For instance, in many Western liberal democracies, a growing chasm exists between the political positions on the liberal left and the conservative right. Sam's (2017) typology of multiculturalism can be utilized to explicate to some extent these conflicting ideological positions. The conservative right commonly embraces the ideology and likeminded policies that promulgate *conservative multiculturalism,* while the liberal left largely adheres to *plural multiculturalism*.

Conservation multiculturalism "is a 'color-blind' or 'one-size-fits-all' approach, where all members of society, regardless of ethnicity (or gender) receive equal treatment before the law" (Sam, 2017, p. 5) as a means, according to its proponents, for decreasing inequality (Ward & Berry, 2016). Here, cultural differences are minimized or ignored. Critics of this perspective contend that societies are predominantly constructed to mirror the world view of the dominant group and hence tend to be rife with inequity that favors that group. For example, an ideology of conservative multiculturalism can be utilized to deny minorities the right to maintain their heritage cultures in public settings, as seen in French laws that prohibit wearing religious symbols in schools. Thus, this approach actually ends up maintaining existing inequality rather than ameliorating it. Without restorative justice measures, such as those promoted by Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs, there cannot be an equal societal playing field that would allow for conservative multiculturalists' idealized vision in which cultural differences are inconsequential (Connaughton & Lacy, 2025; Hofhuis & Vietze, 2025).

Plural multiculturalism, which has many proponents on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, promulgates the recognition of heritage cultures of minority groups, while also embracing autonomous institutions and separate communities for different cultural groups. Yet the weakness of this approach is that it does not promote social cohesion and may even stimulate social division due to the dearth of intergroup interaction. Consequently, various ethnocultural groups may lack regular opportunities for intercultural humanizing contact characterized by the conditions recommended in Amir's (1969) contact hypothesis (such as equal-status contact, self-disclosure, and shared

superordinate goals). This has received robust support in validation studies as a means of promoting positive intercultural encounters and outcomes (Ward & Berry, 2016).

Between these two positions lies a middle way: *liberal multiculturalism*, which advocates intergroup unity, equality, and recognition of cultural differences. Here, societal inequities are problematized; hence, privileges may need to be temporarily granted for some groups to achieve equality (Sam, 2017). Various studies have concluded that similar multicultural models of diversity are associated with greater inclusiveness, less racial bias, and greater engagement from nondominant groups (Ward & Berry, 2016). Such empirical support bolsters the position that liberal multiculturalism is more sustainable than the other two, as it can promote belonging experienced by both minority and majority groups through a mutual acculturation process that occurs when these groups engage in sustained intercultural contact. In other words, liberal multiculturalism is best positioned to achieve one of the greatest challenges of multicultural societies: simultaneously embracing unity and diversity (Safdar et al., 2023). By meeting in this ideological middle, we are better positioned to face the keen challenge of balancing recognition of cultural differences while also cultivating a sense of belonging among the diverse minority and majority groups that inhabit our societies.

Given this foundation, this paper's aims are (1) to demonstrate that belonging constitutes an essential contributor to and outcome of acculturation that deserves greater attention in the acculturation literature, and (2) to offer an agenda for future research that clarifies the relationship between belonging and acculturation. To achieve these goals, I will first define belonging and explicate its importance from a perspective rooted primarily in psychology (including acculturation psychology). Then I will describe how the current scholarly debate about the adaptability of integration as an acculturation strategy (i.e., the accuracy of the integration hypothesis) reveals the need to consider other approaches for identifying optimal acculturation strategies – for one, by utilizing interactive, mutual acculturation models. Thus, I detail how such models may be used to connect belonging and acculturation and conceive a sense of belonging among both majority and minority groups as an essential acculturation outcome. In the sections thereafter, I detail two very different approaches from my own research to theorize and investigate belonging. I conclude with proposals for future research, replete with hypotheses, that detail how the two frameworks from my research may be cojoined with mutual acculturation models to better understand the nexus between belonging and acculturation.

Explaining Belonging

I argued above that belonging is an essential feature of liberal multicultural societies. But what is belonging exactly? Hagerty et al. (1992) defined it as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (p. 173). Chin (2019) described belonging as being "about the idea of a unity or collectivity beyond a mere aggregation of individuals" (p. 717) that is characterized by safety and familiarity within the dyads or groups with whom one belongs. Baumeister and Leary (1995) contended that belonging is a basic human need (a point about which there is broad scholarly agreement) leading Allen et al. (2021) to conclude that "belonging is a central construct in human health, behavior, and experience" (p. 91). Various studies have noted that people try to satisfy belonging through interpersonal relationships and group memberships that they consider to be positive, enduring, and stable (Abrams et al., 2005; Chung et al., 2020; Grigoryev et al., 2023), and that belonging is realized only with commensurate opportunities to achieve it (Allen et al., 2021).

Belonging may be experienced as stable, with little variability across time and different situations, or as a transient, fluctuating state influenced by various daily life events and stressors (Allen et al., 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Motivation can influence perceptions of belonging: some individuals conceive belonging to a certain group as central to their identity, whereas others invest fewer resources in developing and maintaining such relationships (Abrams et al., 2005; Ellemers & Jetten, 2013; Kunst & Sam, 2013). Also, some groups extract substantial resources (e.g., time, money, or demonstrations of loyalty) from prospective or existing members, while other groups expect less so; the degree of alignment between one's willingness to commit such resources and a group's demands for them may in turn have effects on a person's motivation to be accepted by a group (Allen et al., 2021).

The benefits of belonging are found and valued across many cultures (Deci & Ryan, 2011), associating with mental health, adjustment, self-esteem, positive social relationships, and general well-being (Allen et al., 2021; Grigoryev et al., 2023; Jansen et al., 2019; Pickett & Brewer, 2005). Conversely, when needs for belonging go unmet, possible negative mental health outcomes include anxiety, loneliness, aggression, anger, depression, and a lack of self-efficacy (Abrams et al., 2005; Baumeister, 2011; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), as well as an increased risk of physical problems such as cardiovascular difficulties, reduced immunity, and early mortality (Allen et al., 2021). Satisfying the need to belong can also be considered an important part of the acculturation experience. Ward et al. (2020) found that belonging can play a pivotal role

in contributing to immigrant well-being, particularly when it is paired with a multicultural climate; namely, for Korean immigrants in New Zealand, a multicultural climate positively predicted immigrant flourishing and life satisfaction indirectly through belongingness. However numerous its positive effects, though, belonging requires some uniformity of action and/or thought with those whom one enjoys belonging (Chin, 2019; Komisarof, 2012). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that belonging can entail constraining social pressures given the normative expectations that accompany it.

Belonging is multifaceted, with cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitive belonging occurs when a person claims membership in a group as part of one's identity and conceives others as part of the same group (e.g., "I am Japanese, and I share membership in this group with other Japanese people") (Roccas et al., 2008). Affective belonging denotes a positive emotional connection with fellow group members – e.g., feeling accepted, valued, respected, needed, and/or supported (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Behavioral belonging is achieved by "acting like a member," for instance, speaking a group's language (Panicacci, 2019), following their norms, or involvement in their everyday rituals and routines (Komisarof, 2021). In this respect, belonging emerges from competencies, or sets of skills and abilities that enable one to forge social connections, such as verbal and nonverbal communication skills or alignment with social norms (Allen et al., 2021). By behaving like other group members and joining their daily practices, people demonstrate that they are trustworthy, and such mastery empowers them to actively participate in the group (Liu-Farrer, 2020). Chin (2019) described belonging as a practice, or "the ability to navigate the symbols, ideas, and institutions of a group" (p. 717), but in fact, as this quotation implies, "practice" involves not only behavior, but also cognitive understanding of a group's culture. Moreover, since motivation to belong is a key element to achieving it (Allen et al., 2021), overall positive feelings are essential about the enactment of a group's social norms and other practices when one is "performing" belonging. Thus, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects are distinct, yet also interactive and potentially synergistic.

While advances in one of these three domains can stimulate gains in others, resulting in similar trajectories of development, they also may grow disparately, where satisfaction in one coexists with dissatisfaction in another (Komisarof, 2021). For example, Liu (2015) noted that some Chinese-Australians reported cognitive belonging (i.e., they thought of themselves as Australian by virtue of their Australian citizenship and long-term or lifelong residence) as well as behavioral belonging (e.g., they spoke native Australian English and had in many regards assimilated to Australian White

culture). Yet they felt little affective belonging after having been treated as cultural "others" and discriminated many times by White Australians. Liu-Farrer (2020) described immigrants in Japan who experienced primarily affective and behavioral belonging yet lacked a sense of cognitive belonging: they had close emotional ties to various Japanese communities and had developed a mastery of the language and mainstream social norms, yet even among second-generation immigrants, very few if any considered themselves "Japanese."

Next, I consider how one can achieve belonging through acculturation in a multicultural society. John Berry's work is integral to any such discussion, as his prominence in developing the field of acculturation psychology cannot be overstated. However, recent studies have challenged longstanding assumptions supported by Berry's research about the relationship between acculturation and adaptation. Both Berry's findings and recent challenges posed to them are outlined next to broaden understanding of how belonging may be actualized in various multicultural environments.

Challenges to the Integration Hypothesis

A debate over the past several years among scholars about the most adaptive acculturation strategy has shaken the field of acculturation psychology at its core and stimulated calls for novel forms of acculturation research (Grigoryev & Berry, 2022; Kunst, 2021). Essential to understanding this debate is Berry's (1997, 2008) framework of four acculturation strategies: integration (high heritage cultural maintenance/high involvement with the other group to which one is acculturating), assimilation (low maintenance/high involvement), separation (high maintenance/low involvement), and marginalization (low maintenance/low involvement). Addressing how acculturation relates to adaptation in a multicultural society, Berry formulated the integration hypothesis: integration constitutes the most adaptive acculturation strategy, particularly in terms of promoting well-being (Ward & Berry, 2016).

Recently, some studies have questioned the robustness of the evidence supporting the integration hypothesis (Bierwiaczonek et al., 2023; Bierwiaczonek & Kunst, 2021; Kunst, 2021). Though Berry and colleagues' rebuttals (e.g., Grigoryev & Berry, 2022; Grigoryev et al., 2023) have ensured that this remains an area of vigorous debate, it is noteworthy that some older studies also diverged from unquestioning support of the integration hypothesis. For instance, Ward and Kennedy (1994) observed that "assimilation is linked to enhanced sociocultural adjustment but to diminished psychological well-being," whereas separation "is associated with effective

psychological adaptation but is related to decrements in sociocultural competence" (p. 340). Nguyen et al. (1999) found that a bicultural approach, or integration, may have little benefit for those who spend most of their lives in monocultural contexts characterized by strong assimilative pressures – thus joining others (e.g., Birman, 1998; Rudmin, 2006) who found assimilation strategies by minorities to be more beneficial than integration in certain acculturation contexts. This begs the larger question of whether the most adaptive acculturation strategy may be better determined according to the acculturation context, including the goals and needs of acculturators – rather than assuming that integration is always superior.

Some of the confusion over integration's contribution to positive adaptation may also stem from the numerous ways that it has been conceived and operationalized in the acculturation literature. For instance, motivation to integrate can be associated with bicultural cultural identity styles that involve alternating between two (or more) cultural identities or blending aspects of both cultures in hybridized form, each of which is associated with different adaptation outcomes (Ward et al., 2018). Integration could also constitute maintaining one's heritage culture while engaging with the other cultural group through regular contact but without adapting to their culture. In addition, Berry's second dimension of preference for other group involvement has been operationalized in manifold ways, including outgroup identification, preferences for frequency and/or types of outgroup contact, or adopting elements of the outgroup culture, or as sense of belonging to the other group (Berry & Hou, 2019). Readers should note that I employ "other group" and "outgroup" interchangeably throughout this article to denote a group other than one's heritage cultural group and that acculturators may very well *achieve belonging* over time in such outgroups despite the "otherness" implied by such terminology.

This raises the issue as to whether scholars are actually talking about the same phenomenon when we use the umbrella term of integration to cover such a broad array of meanings. As Ward (2024) contended, the "conceptualization, measurement, domain, and context of acculturation and integration underpin their relationships to adaptation" (p. 2). Therefore, the lack of efficacy of integration in adaptation discussed by Bierwiaczonek and Kunst (2021) and Bierwiaczonek et al. (2023) could be to some extent related to such semantic diffuseness. This does not mean that integration's role in adaptation should be entirely disregarded; instead, as Ward (2024) concluded, rather than arguing that integration is always the most adaptive acculturation strategy, it makes greater sense to examine under what circumstances this is so.

Interactive Models of Acculturation: Conceptual Benefits and Unresolved Issues

Given this debate about integration's role in adaptation, what might be another approach for viewing the relationship between acculturation strategies and belonging? If acculturation is a bidirectional phenomenon between groups (Kunst et al., 2023; Sam & Ward, 2021), it is also arguably interactive. In other words, the acculturation strategies of each group may influence each other, and the (in)compatibility of their acculturation strategies could in turn have effects on various acculturation outcomes, such as belonging. Therefore, models that consider both the acculturation strategies of majority and minority groups, and how they interact, can be used to examine the potential relationship between acculturation and belonging.

While Berry (2008) has described both dominant and nondominant culture member acculturation strategies as intrinsic to the acculturation process, interactions between acculturation strategies of these groups have also been theorized notably in the Interactive Acculturation Model ("IAM") (Barrette et al., 2004; Bourhis & Dayan, 2004; Bourhis et al., 1997; Montreuil & Bourhis, 2001), Concordance Model of Acculturation (Piontkowski et al., 2002), and the Relative Acculturation Extended Model (Navas et al., 2007). Each provides a model for assessing the degree of "fit" between the acculturation strategies of interacting groups, as well as that (in)compatibility's impact upon various acculturation outcomes.

Though any of these models may be used to examine the relationship between acculturation strategy combinations and the sense of belonging among members of interacting groups, in this paper, I shall focus on the IAM, as the most extensive body of literature exists about it. In the IAM, various combinations of Berry's acculturation strategies for dominant and nondominant ethnocultural groups are divided into three types of compatibility that associate with different clusters of social-psychological relational outcomes: Consensual (theorized to have the most positive acculturation outcomes from combinations of either shared assimilation or integration strategies), Problematic (meaning assimilation strategies being preferred by one group and integration by the other, which results in mostly ambivalent outcomes), and Conflictual (engendering the most negative outcomes due to extreme divergence of acculturation strategies between interacting groups – i.e., segregation/separation preferred by at least one group if not both) (Bourhis et al., 1997).

Some studies have supported the assertion of the IAM (and similar models) that congruence between acculturation strategies promotes more adaptive outcomes for immigrants and other nondominant groups (e.g.,

Celeste et al., 2014; Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Kunst & Sam, 2013; Rohmann et al., 2008; Zagefka & Brown, 2002). However, Komisarof (2009), using a modified version of the IAM, showed mixed support for the model. The study examined the acculturation strategies of both the Japanese majority and American minority in Japan-based work organizations, how they each perceived the acculturation strategies of their outgroup, and the effects of such perceptions upon a variety of acculturation and work-related outcomes (e.g., outgroup attitudes and job effectiveness, respectively). Also included was the variable of organizational investiture (Jones, 1986), which conceptually overlaps somewhat with affective and behavioral belonging, to assess the extent that participants felt support and acceptance when they interacted with members of their cultural outgroup members in the same work organization. A significant relationship was found between acculturation strategy fit and degree of investiture for Japanese and Americans, with both Consensual and Problematic IAM type mean scores being significantly higher than Conflictual ones; however, there was no difference between Consensual and Problematic types for investiture or any of the other outcome variables, thus contradicting the IAM's premise that Consensual combinations are more adaptive than Problematic ones (though corroborating the assertion that Conflictual fits are less adaptive than the other two). Therefore, while the IAM provides a promising model for examining how acculturation strategies may influence sense of belonging in one's outgroup, research in this area has not been unequivocally supportive of the IAM's fundamental premises and assertions and deserves further exploration.

Belonging is seen as particularly complementary to acculturation as conceived in the IAM due to its similarly interactive, dynamic nature (Yuval-Davis, 2006). As Komisarof (2021) contended, an individual's perceptions of belonging to a group are constructed not only from their desire to achieve group membership, but also how they judge the other group's receptiveness to them becoming a member. As Jansen et al. (2019) noted, this assessment can change over time, constituting a recursive, bidirectional, and dynamic process in which a person continuously reassesses both the group's willingness to include them as well as their own motivation to become a member; similarly, outgroup members make parallel judgments of the potential member's eagerness and appropriateness to belong and consequently adjust their own willingness to include that person. Furthermore, as individuals continuously reassess the fit between their desire to belong to a group and that group's receptiveness to such belonging, their evolving perceptions of that fit inform their overall sense of belonging and their feelings about said belonging (e.g., satisfaction, dissatisfaction, etc.).

> Belonging and acculturation are each informed by an individual's subjective perceptions as to where they stand in relation to the other, which act as feedback mechanisms that increase or decrease their desire to connect with others in the case of belonging or engage with and possibly adopt another culture in the case of acculturation.

We can also infer that these parallel processes may mutually influence each other: Lincoln et al. (2021) argued that acculturation styles are not "choices" made by immigrants but rather describe dynamic processes "shaped in part by the context of reception" (p. 290), with one feature of that context being the sense of belonging felt by immigrants in the receiving society. Likewise, Allen et al. (2021) described belonging as a subjective feeling that exists within an ever-changing social milieu – both helped and hindered by people and experiences involving that social milieu, which in turn interacts with a person's identity, culture, and perceptions. Thus, it is not hard to surmise a dynamic interconnectedness between acculturation and belonging, which themselves both emerge from interactions within broader systems where individuals reside.

The Author's Research of Belonging

Both achieving and maintaining a sense of belonging requires intergroup boundary negotiation. Such processes occur on the boundaries of many types of groups. In my own research, I have focused predominantly upon two types of belonging: (1) migrant (i.e., naturalized and non-naturalized people) senses of belonging when crossing the social boundaries formed in response to their receiving society's prevailing concept of national identity, and (2) the degree of belonging experienced by both dominant and nondominant ethnocultural group members when traversing intergroup boundaries in intercultural workplaces. These two vantage points on belonging are conceptualized distinctly and independently; in other words, I am not claiming that they are equivalent but rather offering two different conceptual tools for conceiving and assessing belonging. The remainder of this paper will provide an overview of both strands of my research and then conclude with recommendations for future studies to examine belonging with acculturation.

The Complexity of Migrant Belonging

Migrant belonging in any society can be assessed through multitudinous approaches and affected by many variables (Komisarof, 2022). For example, contextual factors in migrants' receiving country may limit or alternatively enable opportunities for intercultural encounters (e.g., based upon segregation

in residential neighborhoods, schools, and other places where people gather). Also, legal-political factors (such as definitions of citizenship or policies that restrict immigrants from specific nations or professions) or individual characteristics (including migrant degrees of proficiency in the host country language, professional skills, or levels of education) may influence migrant levels of belonging (Gsir, 2017; Komisarof & Leong, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). My research has addressed prevalent beliefs in various migrant receiving societies about national identity (Komisarof, 2020; Komisarof et al., 2020, 2023, in 2025; Komisarof & Leong, 2020; Leong et al., 2020) – that is, predominant ideas about who belongs in that society as well as the relationship of those beliefs with migrant senses of belonging and mental well-being.

Concepts of National Identity

In line with my approach, scholars in social psychology and related fields who research national identity often focus upon the beliefs held in recipient societies about who belongs – i.e., who is considered "one of us." Such beliefs are based on mental representations, or prototypes of the most typical representatives of a group that include norms, values, and other traits such as racial characteristics (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). These prototypes may or may not deviate from legal definitions of citizenship. The attributes that comprise such prototypes form the content of national identity, which are in turn utilized both by individuals and groups as benchmarks to decide who is part of the ingroup and which newcomers may join that group (Komisarof, 2021; Reijerse et al., 2013).

National identity can be ascribed or achieved. For *ascribed* identity, people base decisions about who belongs to their ingroup on criteria typically fixed at birth and impervious to change or acquisition, such as ancestry, ethnicity, and birthplace (Esses et al., 2005; Weinreich, 2009). Those with *achieved* national identity judge membership based upon attainable benchmarks, such as voicing support for or behaving in accordance with mainstream values (Reijerse et al., 2013), loyalty to political institutions (Esses et al., 2005), respect for local traditions, or simply feeling like a member (Weinreich, 2009).

Ascribed and achieved national identity are more commonly referred to in the literature using the terminology of *ethnic* and *civic* identity, respectively, though the latter pair of terms have somewhat narrower definitions. Those with *ethnic* national identities conceive their ingroup as comprising people with shared ancestry, while those with *civic* national identity believe that membership is achieved by gaining citizenship, participating in sociopolitical institutions, and embracing commonplace values, ideals, as well as rights and responsibilities as a citizen (Taniguchi, 2021). Civic national

identity tends to be considered more inclusive than ethnic identity because it can be achieved through voluntary efforts and encourages societal participation (Reijerse et al., 2013); moreover, civic national identities may mitigate perceptions among majority groups of immigrant threat, which shows promise for greater inclusiveness towards various immigrants (Safdar et al., 2023). However, some researchers (e.g., Komisarof, 2025; Taniguchi, 2021) have questioned the inclusiveness of societies where civic national identity predominates, so evidence is not unequivocal.

Regardless of the terminology used, achieved/civic or ascribed/ethnic prototypes inform people's intergroup attitudes, beliefs, and behavior toward immigrants, which then can influence immigrants' sense of belonging in their receiving society. In response to mainstream ideas among receiving nationals about which immigrants belong in their society, immigrants might accept these notions or contest them if they find them too restrictive, exclusionary, and/or discriminatory. Furthermore, such contestations might occur among immigrants either towards the state or receiving society nationals, as belonging regarding national identity may be conceived either vertically (i.e., toward the state and its institutions), horizontally (i.e., toward fellow inhabitants in society), or both (Chin, 2019). However, the focus of social markers of acceptance (SMA) research is upon the horizontal dimension, though the two dimensions can be interrelated (Komisarof & Leong, 2020).

Naturally, there is no nation where everyone embraces only ethnic or civic identity, as prototypes can vary by geographic region, political ideology, ethnic group, and other demographics (Devos & Mohamed, 2014; Pehrson, 2019). Also, individuals are often inconsistent: the same person may hold both civic and ethnic concepts that affect their beliefs and behavior differently depending upon the social context (Taniguchi, 2021), their prejudice towards specific groups (Devos & Mohamed, 2014; Komisarof et al., 2025; Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2022), social pressure, or self-interest (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to recognize that certain national identities may be common within a specific populace but not universal, and that individuals may also simultaneously ascribe to more than one national identity concept.

Social Markers of Acceptance: A Lens for Assessing National Identity and Inclusiveness Toward Migrants

Ethnic and civic concepts of national identity illuminate much about levels of migrant inclusiveness, or the potential for migrants to belong, in any given society. Also critical are the *specific criteria* by which people define their national ingroup when they utilize such concepts, as those criteria can illuminate

potential paths toward belonging for migrants. Social markers of acceptance (SMA), originally conceived by Leong (2014), serve as a framework for doing so. Komisarof et al. (2020) defined SMA as "socially constructed indicators (e.g., adherence to social norms; expression of mainstream beliefs, attitudes, or values; and competencies such as language skills), or the perceptual signposts that recipient nationals use in deciding whether a migrant is a part of the host community" (p. 238). Therefore, individual social markers are the attributes considered important by receiving society members for migrants to possess in order to be accepted in that society to the same degree as native-born citizens. Such markers may be specific to the culture of the dominant ethnocultural group in that society (for instance, speaking their language or following their social norms), but they may also be inclusive of many cultures, such as valuing cultural diversity, as Jassi and Safdar (2021) found among Canadian undergraduates. Thus, contrary to the criticism of normative approaches to national identity that have been levied by some scholars (for example, Chin, 2019), the SMA framework does not assume that the model of belonging that can best accommodate diversity is necessarily uniform, as individual markers, depending upon what they are, may allow for many types of migrants to belong. Moreover, the SMA framework allows for the repeated measurement and reevaluation of the criteria for ingroup membership – hence providing a vantagepoint for how cultures and identity may transform longitudinally and for how belonging within them may be renegotiated.

SMA are particularly helpful in understanding both the content of national identity concepts and their degrees of inclusiveness. Specifically, the more markers endorsed by a person, or the greater importance placed upon those endorsed markers, the harder it is for migrants to become ingroup members, and the less inclusive one's concept is of national identity. Also, the more difficult these markers are considered by receiving society nationals for migrants to achieve, the more exclusive their concept of national identity (Komisarof et al., 2020, 2023). For example, receiving society members may assume that their language or way of life is impossible for immigrants to grasp and hence justify excluding them based upon said beliefs ("They don't belong because they cannot learn our language or adjust to our way of life") – which are beliefs sometimes used in Japan to justify rejection of immigrants from communities or other groups (Komisarof, 2011, 2012, 2014). Conversely, if receiving society members view their language as readily acquired and their way of life accessible to anyone, then these constitute more achievable benchmarks for immigrants, as it is considered possible to acculturate in these domains.

If expectations expressed through the markers are so cumbersome that they become virtually unachievable (for example, many markers are emphasized

or markers are prevalent that demand largely unrealistic levels of assimilation), then marker-related research can identify this problem. However, when marker-related benchmarks are achievable, they can help to engender greater belonging among immigrants, as they provide a nexus of acculturative overlap (for example, in providing a shared language or knowledge about social norms) that can be used in daily intercultural communication between immigrants and receiving society members to build more positive relationships. While acknowledging and respecting the unique identities of immigrants is important, taken to the extreme, if there is no overlap in language or culture between immigrants and receiving society members, then sustained, positive intercultural communication becomes much more difficult. In this sense, SMA – particularly when they are civic, achievable ones – provide benchmarks that potentially empower immigrants to participate in society through shared meaning schemata, social norms, and a linguistic medium to promote communication between them and the majority.

Research indicates that the inclusiveness of group boundaries can vary by social context. For SMA, receiving society members may be more (or less) accepting of immigrants depending upon their perceptions of immigrant threats, contributions, and social status (Jassi & Safdar, 2021; Komisarof et al., 2020, 2023; Leong, 2014). Receiving nationals tend to grow more exclusive when they perceive immigrants as threatening their access to limited economic resources such as jobs or public services (known as *realistic threat*) and/or threatening to destabilize the local culture and identity (i.e., *symbolic threat*) (Stephan et al., 2009). When such threats are perceived, the group boundaries of receiving nationals become more exclusive, as they emphasize more markers (Jassi & Safdar, 2021; Leong, 2014) or more strongly insist upon the importance of the markers that they value (Komisarof et al., 2020, 2023, 2025).

Conversely, receiving nationals grow more accepting of immigrants when they think of them as *economic* contributors who take undesirable or unfilled jobs, accept low salaries, and/or possess valuable human capital in the form of professional skills and knowledge, and/or as *cultural* contributors who bring with them new, desirable cultural commodities such as food, clothes, or music (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2022). When receiving nationals recognize such contributions, SMA tend to be emphasized less, resulting in more inclusive group boundaries (Komisarof et al., 2023; Leong, 2014). Also, receiving society members are often more accepting of immigrants whom they view as higher in status, as less emphasis upon both civic and ethnic markers has been found to associate with higher immigrant perceived status (Komisarof et al., 2023). Social identity theory similarly predicts that people are less accepting of those

whom they perceive as lower in status than themselves since admitting them would lessen the esteem they derive from their ingroup membership (Terry et al., 2006). I shall return to this discussion about SMA importance, interactions with these contextual variables, and their potential relationship with acculturation strategies later in the article when proposing future research in belonging and acculturation.

A Framework of Belonging in Intercultural Workplaces

Berry's (1997) second acculturation dimension refers to the degree and quality of intergroup contact that is desired with one's outgroup. As argued earlier, belonging may be considered a basic human need. Therefore, it follows that as people acculturate, the negotiation of group boundaries constitutes part of the acculturation process, and sense of belonging may be conceived as an outcome of such social negotiations. My framework of workplace belonging (Komisarof, 2016, 2018, 2022) conceptualizes the degree of belonging that either majority or minority group members feel toward their cultural outgroup in the workplace (see Figure 1), with two types of belonging considered simultaneously: the degree to which people perceive themselves to be accepted as members of another group's cultural-linguistic community, and the degree that they see themselves accepted as core members of their work organization. Sense of belonging on each dimension is conceived on a continuum from low to high.

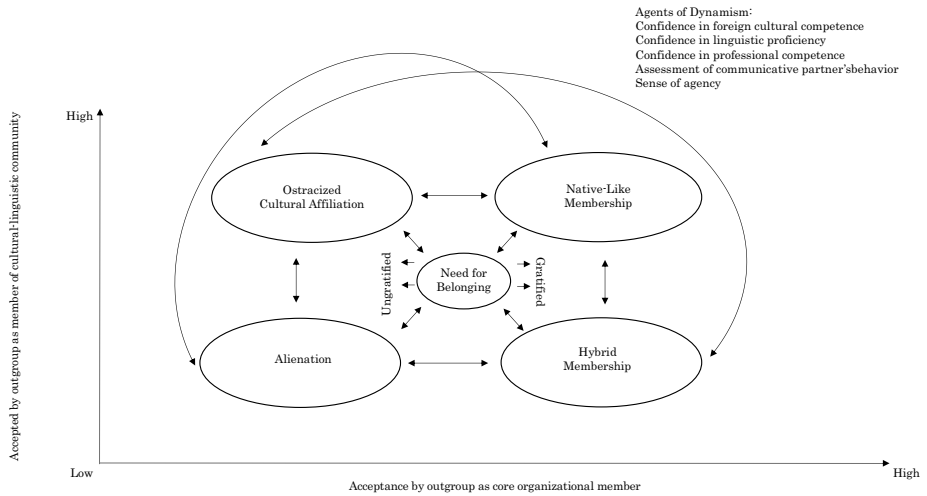

Figure 1: Framework of workplace acculturation

Reproduced from Komisarof (2018) with permission from *Journal of Intercultural Communication*.

Workplace belonging constitutes the framework's focus since work is often a primary context where majority and minority culture members interact and hence acculturation can occur. Various studies have highlighted the need for belonging among expatriates and other types of migrants among their colleagues (Aycan, 1997; Palthe, 2004; Wexler & Lee, 2025), and indeed, the global proliferation of DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) programs attests to the importance of belonging in work organizations to promote productivity and a sense of well-being among employees (Connaughton & Lacy, 2025; Hofhuis & Vietze, 2025). Various work-related outcomes can be linked to a sense of belonging: for instance, feelings of acceptance and support among coworkers can positively correlate with job performance and organizational commitment (Chung et al., 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2011; Gaertner et al., 2000; Komisarof, 2022; Shore et al., 2011).

Figure 1's vertical axis depicts the degree that an individual (either a member of a majority or minority group) perceives themself to be accepted as a member of the cultural-linguistic community to which they are acculturating. Those who report high belonging on this dimension typically describe *feeling* and *behaving* like a group member, as well as support from members of the other cultural-linguistic community to do so. In Komisarof (2018), interview participants said they felt trusted by the other group to participate in their daily routines, rituals, and to enact important social roles, all the while interacting according to predominant norms and values in that cultural-linguistic community. In such situations, participants often communicated in the language of their outgroup, or if they were novices, they were encouraged to do so. Such linguistic and behavioral imitation, i.e., assimilation, was not seen as repressive, but rather as a means of showing that the individual was (or was on their way to being) an accepted member who could perform confidently and competently within that cultural-linguistic context. Those reporting high degrees of cultural-linguistic belonging also thought that their outgroup members perceived a small psychological distance between them; conversely, those who described low cultural-linguistic belonging believed that their outgroup members assumed that there was a large psychological distance between them and that they were seen as incapable of adapting to the outgroup's culture, communicating effectively in their language, and/or competently practicing their social norms.

Cultural-linguistic belonging is distinct from the type of belonging examined through the SMA framework; using the latter, researchers identify the criteria for immigrants to be accepted to the same extent as a native-born citizen and how the emphasis upon those criteria changes contextually. It can also be used to assess the flexibility of intergroup boundaries by measuring the

importance that receiving society members place upon the markers, as well as how difficult they believe the acquisition of markers to be. My intercultural workplace belonging framework measures one's actual sense of belonging to another cultural-linguistic outgroup; moreover, sense of belonging to a different cultural-linguistic outgroup here focuses on affective and behavioral belonging, not cognitive belonging. In other words, the acculturator would not necessarily claim to be a member of the other group ("I am American" or "I am Japanese," for example), though they might hold deep affinity toward it and within various intercultural relationships feel quite accepted. Rather, they typically report warm emotions toward the other group members (i.e., affective belonging) and can behave in accordance with those group members (e.g., by speaking the language and following social norms) – or are at least encouraged to do so as they learn how to perform such behavioral protocols.

This measure has utility particularly when crossing into cultural groups with a strong sense of ethnic identity, as people in such societies are unlikely to admit outsiders who do not fit the ethnic prototype for ingroup membership; however, cultural-linguistic belonging allows for other types of membership, as it does not require that people cognitively identify with each other. Such types of liminal belonging achieved by people who do not fit the ethnic prototype of their destination societies have been detailed in the intercultural literature (e.g., Komisarof, 2012; Komisarof & Zhu, 2016; Sam, 2016). Thus, in this framework, cultural-linguistic belonging is conceived solely as a combination of affective bonding and behavioral adaptation–not as changes in identity. This is because emotional connection and behavioral participation can be realized without trying (often futilely) to gain ethnicity-based membership in cultures with largely ascribed national identities.

In Figure 1, the horizontal dimension illustrates the degree to which people see themselves as core organizational members, especially in relation to frequent coworkers from the cultural outgroup. In Komisarof (2018), individuals who described high degrees of organizational belonging recounted supportive coworker relationships, collegial collaboration, leadership opportunities, influence in group decisions, access to insider knowledge, and ample employment of their professional skills, while those with low reported levels of this kind of belonging noted few (to none) of these indicators in their professional lives.

Ontological Interpretive Spaces

The two dimensions in this framework depicted in Figure 1 can be simultaneously considered to delineate four *ontological interpretive spaces.* These are vantage points from which individuals construct the subjective meaning

of their intercultural interactions, assess the quality of their intercultural work relationships, and make decisions about how to behave within those relationships. In other words, these ontological interpretive spaces constitute *perspectives that people temporarily mentally inhabit* to construe the meaning of their intercultural interactions during the acculturation process. Individuals adopt these perspectives prompted by their desires to satisfy their belonging needs at the levels of work organization and cultural-linguistic community (Komisarof, 2018). When these needs are gratified, people shift into Native-Like or Hybrid Membership, and when unfulfilled, they move toward Ostracized Cultural Affiliation or Alienation (as illustrated in Figure 1).

The four ontological interpretive spaces are detailed in Komisarof (2016, 2018), but in summary they comprise:

1. *Aliens* (low cultural-linguistic community and organizational belonging),
2. *Ostracized Cultural Affiliates* (high cultural-linguistic community/low organizational belonging),
3. *Native-Like Members* (high in both dimensions), and
4. *Hybrid Members* (high organizational/low cultural-linguistic community belonging).

Though this framework, like Berry's, utilizes the juxtaposition of two dimensions, the two frameworks are very different. The two dimensions in my framework focus upon two levels of belonging, while Berry's framework is centered upon heritage culture maintenance and outgroup involvement. If Berry's outgroup involvement dimension is operationalized as one's sense of belonging in the other group, then this dimension shares some similarity with cultural-linguistic outgroup belonging; however, in practice, these two dimensions are not conceived or measured in the same way in the literature. Berry and Hou (2019) appears to be the only study using Berry's framework that conceives the outgroup involvemas one's sense of belonging in the other group. They measured this dimension using just one question ("How would you describe your sense of belonging to Canada?"). In the Komisarof framework, 6 domains of cultural-linguistic belonging and 7 domains of organizational belonging are assessed – each with subscales of 2 to 5 items (Komisarof, 2022). These questions focus upon various manifestations of affective and behavioral belonging in intercultural workplaces. Therefore, while both frameworks may be potentially used to examine sense of belonging to another cultural group, Berry's framework is almost always used with other

operationalizations of the outgroup involvement dimension, and his framework does not address organizational belonging.

Komisarof (2018) observed that people tend to rely mostly on one (sometimes two) ontological interpretive spaces to conceive their intercultural experiences, but they also may move among any of the four as their sense of belonging in reconstructed in their cultural-linguistic outgroup and organization (Komisarof, 2016, 2018). Such changes occur through contextual features, i.e., *agents of dynamism* (listed in the upper right of Figure 1), which include the meaning that people assign to their communicative partner's behavior, their own sense of agency, and their level of assurance in their own cultural, linguistic, and professional competencies to successfully navigate the situation at hand. Thus, belonging is conceived in this model as a highly interactional, dynamic process (for a more detailed discussion, see Komisarof, 2021).

Komisarof (2022) validated instruments measuring cultural-linguistic group and organizational belonging and found for both migrants to Japan (of 24 nationalities) and Japanese receiving society members, Native-Like and Hybrid Membership correlated with more positive outcomes than Alienation or Ostracized Cultural Affiliation for measures of job effectiveness, flourishing, and organizational commitment. These associations proved robust while controlling for ten covariates (e.g., length of time abroad, gender, and ethnicity). Given the positive outcomes associated with Native-Like and Hybrid Membership, further research is recommended to discern how these two types of belonging correlate with acculturation strategies of majority and minority groups, which will be taken up in the next section.

In summary, this framework illustrates how multilayered dimensions of belonging interact with each other, as well as how acculturators' senses of belonging to cultural-linguistic outgroups and organizations associate with important workplace and psychological outcomes. As the framework and its measures can be applied to members of both dominant cultural majorities and minorities, it constitutes a useful tool for examining acculturation processes and outcomes among a broad variety of groups.

Recommendations for Further Theory Development

As discussed in Komisarof (2021), belonging may be conceived as an independent or a dependent variable, since it may contribute to social and psychological outcomes, be influenced by social and psychological variables, or have a bi-directional relationship with them. For instance, Chiu et al. (2016)

noted that sense of belonging at school for students has been found to share a bi-directional relationship with rates of delinquency, social rejection from peers, and depression. Belonging can also act as a mediator (Lincoln et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2020) or conceivably as an otherwise correlated variable depending upon the theory underlying a particular study and research design.

Given such flexibility, various proposals can be made for future research examining the nexus of acculturation and belonging. In general, the relationship between them is theorized as bidirectional and synergistic: greater belonging can serve as a stimulus for individuals to acculturate more thoroughly (either via assimilation or integration), and deeper acculturation (once again via assimilation or integration) can result in more thorough belonging in cultural outgroups. Only further research can prove whether such relationships are causal and directional, but studies across a wide variety of contexts demonstrate the salience of belonging as a construct and its consistent associations with positive psychosocial outcomes, regardless of whether it is tested as an independent, dependent, or correlated variable (Allen et al., 2021).

Refining Understanding of Mutual Interactive Acculturation and Belonging

One goal of future research should be to clarify the relationship between belonging and mutual, interactive acculturation as conceived, for example, in Bourhis and colleagues' (1997) IAM. However, the meaning and measurement of acculturation vary as a function of how the Berry dimensions (which the IAM is based upon) are defined, which in turn influences one's findings, as well as how those findings should be interpreted. Thus, to best analyze the relationship between acculturation strategies and belonging when utilizing interactive models of acculturation, Ward's (2024) recommendations for acculturation research should be applied: to systematically examine (1) differences between studies in the conceptualization of the Berry dimensions being used (i.e., when the outgroup involvement dimension addresses contact/participation, identification, or cultural adoption), (2) situational features (for instance differences between acculturation in private or public contexts), and (3) domain (divergent findings for behaviors and attitudes). Then, moving beyond Ward's sage advice, it is necessary to assess the differential relationships of those conceptualizations of acculturation strategies *and their alignments* with belonging.

It is also noteworthy that each of the interactive acculturation frameworks assesses acculturation strategy combinations differently. For instance, in the Concordance Model of Acculturation, if two interacting groups prefer

separation, this is considered a Consensual fit of acculturation strategies (Rohmann et al., 2008), while in the IAM, this alignment is thought to be Conflictual due to the mutual desire for little to no involvement with each other (Bourhis et al., 1997). Future studies would make a great contribution to understanding mutual acculturation by testing which model's assumptions about acculturation strategy combinations best predict results for acculturation outcomes like belonging. Moreover, by using longitudinal data to assess causality, we can better identify which types of confluence between acculturation styles align with belonging, and possibly the mechanisms underlying such associations. We may also find that this relationship varies depending upon whether we are assessing cognitive, behavioral, or affective belonging, so it is important to measure each of these three types of belonging to tease out such nuances.

Adding more complexity, the compatibility of acculturation strategies in interactive acculturation frameworks may be conceived and measured using two different approaches: (1) comparing the self-reported acculturation strategies of two interacting groups (i.e., absolute attitude deviations), or (2) comparing the self-reported acculturation strategy of one group with the perceptions that those same people have of their outgroup members' acculturation strategies (i.e., self-reported attitude deviations). While Bourhis et al. (1997) originally proposed the former, the latter method has been employed in other studies (e.g., Komisarof, 2009; Piontkowski et al., 2002; Zagefka & Brown, 2002). Zagefka and Brown (2002) justified this approach, contending that "people's subjective perceptions of reality constitute and *become* the reality that informs their psychological responses" (p. 173). Future comparative research might also assess which of these conceptualizations provides the conditions for the strongest correlation between acculturation strategy alignments and sense of belonging.

Rich possibilities also exist for future research to probe the nexus of my framework for workplace belonging with the IAM. Specifically, I can offer the following hypotheses: H1: Greater congruence between acculturation strategies in the form of Consensual matches between integration or assimilation for interacting groups will associate with greater organizational belonging. This means that, if both sides share integration strategies, then one would not necessarily expect high cultural-linguistic belonging – but given the involvement of the groups with each other at work, high organizational belonging is anticipated. H2: Greater congruence between acculturation strategies in the form of Consensual matches of assimilation for interacting groups will associate with greater cultural-linguistic belonging. Presumably, both hypotheses H1 and H2 would be supported for both absolute and self-reported attitude deviations.

Though Consensual fits have been hypothesized to have the strongest relationship with cultural-linguistic and organizational belonging, it is possible that Problematic fits will result in comparably positive acculturation outcomes. In Komisarof (2009), for the variable of organizational investiture, data suggested that among participants characterized by Problematic acculturation strategy fits, constructive uses of stress by some may have raised their group's aggregate scores, resulting in scores statistically indistinguishable from those of Consensual participants. Therefore, future studies should not only test associations between cultural-linguistic community and organizational belonging with the Interactive Acculturation Model's three kinds of acculturation strategy fits, but also measure stress from intercultural contact as a moderating variable to see if Komisarof's (2009) results are replicated. If stress is found to be a moderator, this would demonstrate the constructive role of non-debilitating stress in promoting deeper acculturation and better intercultural relations characterized by greater senses of belonging among interacting parties (see McGonigal, 2016, for a discussion of the relationship between non-debilitating stress and improved psychological and performance outcomes).

SMA, Acculturation, and Belonging

Future research can also utilize SMA, perceptions of immigrant threat and contribution, and acculturation strategies to illuminate the types of psychological orientations that people adopt when constructing inclusive/exclusive intergroup boundaries that encourage/inhibit belonging. For instance, Komisarof et al. (2023) found that when Japanese receiving society nationals used ethnic markers as criteria for the social acceptance of immigrants, they also tended to perceive immigrants as more threatening than when they employed civic markers to do so; in other words, ethnic markers correlated to a greater extent with threat perceptions than civic ones. Therefore, we can conceive ethnic national identity concepts and perceptions of immigrant threat as priming receiving nationals to be less accepting of immigrants, thus discouraging belonging, and civic identity concepts and lower perceptions of immigrant threat to be more accepting, hence encouraging belonging.

Several hypotheses can be offered relating SMA and acculturation strategy alignments. First, receiving society members who self-report Conflictual alignments with immigrants will emphasize primarily ethnic SMA and view immigrants as more threatening (and contributing less) than their receiving society counterparts who perceive Consensual fits, with Problematic alignments located in between Conflictual and Consensual ones. Moreover, receiving society members perceiving Consensual alignments are expected to perceive less threat and greater immigrant contributions, and emphasize civic

SMA more than those who report Conflictual fits, with Problematic alignments found in between these two.

Extrapolating one step further, we can predict that SMA, acculturation strategy alignments, perceived intergroup similarity, perceived immigrant threat and contributions, and support for multiculturalism (as presented by van de Vijver, 2014) form a nomological network. This is based on van de Vijver's (2014) findings, using a Dutch sample in the Netherlands (i.e., receiving society nationals), of associations between support for cultural maintenance by immigrants, low perceived immigrant threat, low perceived ethnic distance, and support for multiculturalism. Thus, we can hypothesize that civic marker use, Consensual acculturation strategy alignments, greater perceived intergroup similarity, and support for multiculturalism will correlate, while ethnic marker emphasis will associate with Conflictual acculturation strategy alignments, lower perceived intergroup similarity, and disagreement with multiculturalism. Once again, Problematic fits are expected to associate somewhere in between Consensual and Conflictual alignments for each of these measures, unless a moderating variable such as constructive stress influences said associations. Any future research is recommended to include theory-driven potential moderators such as constructive stress given Komisarof's (2009) findings related to this variable, which challenged the fundamental premise in the IAM that Consensual alignments result in more positive acculturation outcomes than Problematic ones.

Conclusion

In our socially and politically fractured world, we desperately need models for cohesion that bring people closer together. Belonging constitutes an important measure of whether people are doing more than coexisting with each other's differences, moving well beyond mere tolerance (Komisarof, 2021), so a sense of belonging in other groups can serve as a benchmark for whether intergroup contact is leading to positive outcomes. This paper has detailed two frameworks for conceiving belonging: one at the level of national identity, and the other combining vantage points of work organization and cultural-linguistic community belonging. Moreover, future research directions have been proposed to deepen our understanding of how mutual, interactive acculturation relates to belonging. As this relationship becomes clearer, educators and policy makers can better grasp what types of acculturation have greater potential for promoting a sense of belonging among immigrants in their receiving societies, which can then be utilized to create educational programs and policies that promulgate this essential relational outcome.

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