

Acculturation Defined

Acculturation is a process of cultural contact and exchange through which a person or group comes to adopt certain values and practices of a culture that is not originally their own, to a greater or lesser extent. The result is that the original culture of the person or group remains, but it is changed by this process.

When the process is at its most extreme, assimilation occurs wherein the original culture is wholly abandoned and the new culture adopted in its place. However, other outcomes can also occur that fall along a spectrum from minor change to total change, and these include separation, integration, marginalization, and transmutation.

The first known use of the term "acculturation" within the social sciences was by John Wesley Powell in a report for the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology in 1880. Powell later defined the term as the psychological changes that occur within a person due to cultural exchange that occurs as a result of extended contact between different cultures. Powell observed that, while they exchange cultural elements, each retains its own unique culture.

Later, in the early 20th century, acculturation became a focus of American sociologists who used ethnography to study the lives of immigrants and the extent to which they integrated into U.S. society. W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki examined this process with Polish immigrants in Chicago in their 1918 study "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America." Others, including Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, focused their research and theories on the outcome of this process known as assimilation.

While these early sociologists focused on the process of acculturation experienced by immigrants, and also by Black Americans within

predominantly white society, sociologists today are more attuned to the two-way nature of cultural exchange and adoption that happens through the process of acculturation.