

The Concept of Acculturation in Health Research: Assumptions about Rationality and Progress

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ABSTRACT

Recent research designed to explain differences in health and illness among ethnic minorities often focuses on cultural influences on behavior and lifestyles, viewing individual behavioral choices as based on cultural beliefs and traditions. Commonly, ethnic culture is operationalized and measured as “level of acculturation,” which is then correlated with various health outcomes. In this paper, the conceptual basis of “acculturation” in health research is examined. It is argued that the notion of culture is poorly articulated in this research, relying instead on “common-sense” ideas about the origins of valued and dis-valued ideas and behaviors. As a result, acculturation health research is driven by a priori evaluative assumptions about the sources of rational and irrational behaviors. While failing to explicitly define ethnic and “mainstream” culture, ethnic culture is implicitly conceived as foreign, exotic, and antithetical to rationality; at the same time “main-stream” culture is viewed as its opposite. The model is rife with historical and conceptual difficulties. It is derived from folk wisdom about rationality and progress, which is galvanized in the ostensibly scientific construct of “acculturation.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hunt is Associate Professor of Research in the Department of Pediatrics and Director of Research and Evaluation for the Hispanic Center of Excellence at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. She received a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Harvard University and B.A. and M.A. degrees in anthropology from Wayne State University. Over the past 12 years, Dr. Hunt has conducted several studies of illness concepts and treatment practices in South Texas and Southern Mexico. She has conducted studies of cancer treatment, pesticide use, and reproductive health in Southern Mexico, and of diabetes management and cancer screening in South Texas. A central focus throughout this work has been comparing and contrasting biomedical and patient perspectives on illness and health, and examining how a shared vision of specific illness events and a course of action are negotiated. Her recent research focuses on communication and decision making in prenatal genetic screening among low income Hispanic women in South Texas.