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Master one (Civ&lit)

### **Assimilation among different cultures**

#### **1. Historical background**

Cultural differences emerge through the interactions between immigrant populations and native communities, often shaped by the process of acculturation (the process through which individuals or groups adopt the cultural norms, behaviors, and practices of another cultural group, often as a result of prolonged contact or interaction). On an individual level, acculturation refers to the adoption of elements of the surrounding culture by newcomers, which plays a significant role in their integration into society. These cultural exchanges and adaptations affect not only the individual but also the groups and organizations they are a part of. While cultural diversity is a hallmark of immigrant communities, over time, it often diminishes as immigrants and their descendants gradually align with the dominant host culture.

Assimilation can occur naturally or be a structured process, influenced by a range of psychological, social, and economic factors. Immigrants may consciously choose to acculturate to enhance their opportunities or feel compelled to do so under external pressures. While many immigrants seek to preserve elements of their original culture, the assimilation process frequently leads to a dilution of cultural practices and the adoption of behaviors, values, and customs of the host society. This is a complex and dynamic process that unfolds at various levels, ranging from individual adjustments to larger social shifts within communities.

The degree of cultural integration can vary significantly, with some individuals and groups experiencing a smooth transition into the host culture, while others retain their cultural heritage more strongly. In some cases, this interaction results in biculturalism, where individuals maintain aspects of their original culture alongside the host culture, navigating both identities within their social lives. The extent to which immigrants and their descendants retain or modify their cultural traditions depends on factors such as generational change, social acceptance, and the opportunities for cultural expression within the host society.

Throughout history, assimilation has played a key role in shaping societies, with the “melting pot” concept often used to describe situations where diverse cultures blend into a single entity. However, this process can lead to cultural homogenization, where unique cultural identities are lost or diminished. In contrast, some advocate for a “salad bowl” strategy, where multiple cultures coexist while retaining their distinctiveness, emphasizing multiculturalism over complete assimilation and promoting the preservation of diverse cultural identities.

Ultimately, assimilation is a complex process shaped by social, economic, and historical factors. While it can foster integration and unity in diverse societies, it also presents challenges for minority groups in preserving their cultural identity.

## **2. Definition and types of Cultural Assimilation**

Cultural assimilation is often described in sociology as the process where immigrant and minority groups integrate into the dominant society. There are different forms and theories of this process, and it’s helpful to view assimilation as a spectrum rather than a fixed outcome. On one end of the spectrum is full assimilation, where an immigrant group loses its distinct identity and becomes fully part of the dominant society. On the other end, ethno cultural transmutation occurs, where the dominant society incorporates only select elements from the immigrant cultures.

Between these two extremes, other forms of assimilation are possible. These include societies where different cultural groups coexist separately but harmoniously, or situations where there is competitive pluralism, where both dominant and minority groups vie for influence over societal institutions. These various outcomes have been seen in many countries with large immigrant populations. For example, full assimilation occurred with earlier European immigrants in places like Australia and North America. However, newer immigrants in these countries are more likely to experience other forms of assimilation.

In countries like Malaysia, Fiji, and post-colonial Africa, competitive pluralism has been the norm due to histories of racial and cultural division. High levels of immigration in Western welfare states during the 20th century led to the development of multiculturalism as an official policy in nations like the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. After the fall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and

the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many Central and Eastern European countries began transitioning from homogenous to more diverse societies. These countries, along with developing nations that have imported foreign labor, now face the challenge of determining the most suitable strategy to assimilation or multiculturalism for their changing populations.

Assimilation can occur in different ways, depending on the circumstances and the level of choice involved. Voluntary assimilation happens when individuals or groups choose to adopt the dominant culture's traits, often seeking social acceptance or better economic opportunities. A historical example of this is the many European immigrants in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who voluntarily assimilated into American culture in order to integrate into society and improve their living conditions.

On the other hand, forced assimilation involves coercive measures that compel minority groups to abandon their cultural practices. This type of assimilation has often been implemented through government policies or other authoritative forces. A well-known example is the forced assimilation of Native Americans in the U.S., where they were pressured to adopt European customs, languages, and religions, often in an effort to erase indigenous cultures. Similar forms of forced assimilation occurred globally during colonial times, where colonizing powers imposed their cultures on indigenous populations, seeking to diminish or eliminate native traditions and identities.

### **3. Importance of Cultural Assimilation**

Cultural assimilation is a significant process in today's globalized society. When people move to a new country, there is often an expectation that they will adopt the culture and ways of life of the native population. Both governments and citizens typically anticipate that immigrants will integrate into the existing culture, which highlights the importance of cultural assimilation. While some may argue that requiring individuals to shed their original culture could be ethnocentric or unfair, there are many positive aspects to embracing a new culture. Assimilation can benefit both the immigrant and the host society.

One important factor in this process is time. The longer an individual stays in the host country, the easier it becomes to adapt and blend in with the native population. Over time, immigrants can learn the customs, traditions, and values of their new society, which helps them, understand and navigate

cultural differences. This understanding can reduce stereotypes and prejudice, fostering a sense of acceptance for both the host culture and the immigrant. By assimilating, individuals and communities can avoid intercultural conflicts and build stronger, more inclusive societies.

#### **4. Benefits of Cultural Assimilation**

Cultural assimilation often brings subtle changes that can have a significant impact on individuals and communities. A good example of this is seen in Willy Russell's play *Educating Rita*, where Rita's interactions with Frank and his friends highlight the process of assimilation. As Rita becomes part of their world, it's clear that the process not only affects her, but also enriches her environment. Initially, Rita's attraction to Frank stems from her dissatisfaction with her own culture, while Frank's troubled life adds to the intrigue. Similarly, Rita's youth becomes a point of fascination for Frank.

As Rita becomes more educated and begins to integrate into the middle class, her relationship with Frank and his friends becomes more strained. She finds herself no longer content with her previous cultural surroundings but also feels uncomfortable in the new one she is entering. This internal conflict is reflected when Rita embarrasses her old friends, showing her struggle with her evolving cultural identity. This tension highlights the complexities of cultural assimilation and the challenges it can bring as individuals try to balance old and new cultural influences.

##### **4.1 Cultural Exchange and Enrichment**

Cultural exchange is one of the most rewarding outcomes of cultural assimilation. When different cultures come into contact—such as when immigrants move to a new country—both cultures have the opportunity to influence and enrich each other. For immigrants, this often means adopting elements of the new culture, while also contributing aspects of their own culture to the wider society. Some of these exchanges are subtle and not immediately obvious, though food is a more tangible example of cultural sharing.

In many Western societies, it's common to find a wide range of ethnic restaurants, such as Mexican, Indian, Chinese, and Lebanese, offering both traditional dishes and local adaptations. This broadens the choices available to society and helps expose people to different perspectives, beliefs, and ways of life. As Richard Lee notes, cultural change can result from two sources: diffusion (the spread of ideas from one culture to another) and direct culture change, which is rarer and often occurs

when new ideas are introduced into a culture. In today's globalized world, cultural diffusion is especially important. A culture can adopt ideas from another, as seen with the spread of human rights and democratic values, which were largely shaped by the political systems of the USA and EU. These concepts, enshrined in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have influenced countries worldwide as they work to create more democratic societies.

When cultures mix sufficiently, new subcultures and countercultures can emerge, particularly in situations where cultures share equal power. This can lead to both acculturation and significant cultural change. One example is the influence of Asian culture on Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, which helped create a vibrant fusion of cultural expressions. Such cultural blossoming, as seen in the Renaissance and other historical movements like the European Baroque and Enlightenment periods, showcases the transformative power of cultural exchange.

#### **4.2 Increased Understanding and Tolerance**

Cultural assimilation can lead to greater understanding and tolerance between different groups. As immigrants adapt to a new culture, they often learn the majority language, which can result in a weakening of their connection to their native language and country. This process may lead to changes in their cultural practices, values, and beliefs, sometimes even causing them to lose aspects of their original culture. In some cases, individuals might feel that they are more valued in the host culture if they discard their own cultural identity.

However, this modification or loss of culture, driven by assimilation or globalization, can also foster understanding and tolerance of other cultures. Steiner and Ybarra (2001) highlight that immigration has been a constant throughout history, prompting concerns about how cultures maintain their identity amid the pressure of assimilation. Psychologists have studied these dynamics to understand how cultural diversity can be preserved, even when minority groups adopt elements of the dominant culture. Over time, when immigrant groups interact with the majority culture and successfully acculturate, it can lead to a shift in attitudes among the dominant group. This creates opportunities for greater social harmony by reducing social prejudices, racism, and xenophobia, ultimately promoting more inclusive communities.

### **4.3 Economic Advantages**

Economic advantages are one of the most common reasons for pursuing assimilation in modern times. Immigrants often bring new skills, ideas, and labor to the host country, contributing to economic growth. For example, Chinese immigrants played a crucial role in building the transcontinental railway in the United States, and guest workers in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s helped fuel the economic boom. Nowadays, countries often conduct economic impact studies to evaluate the financial benefits of immigration. These studies typically show that the economic impact of migration is positive overall.

However, the economic benefits are not always equally shared, especially for the immigrants themselves. While an influx of workers can lead to increased economic activity, it often results in exploitation and leaves immigrants with limited political or economic rights. In many cases, any increase in the country's GDP from immigration is primarily felt by the native population. For instance, in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, native workers' early retirements were subsidized largely by the labor of immigrant "guest workers." Immigrants are sometimes blamed for economic downturns or perceived cultural loss in welfare states, leading to policies aimed at limiting immigration and assimilation, as seen in Japan's restrictive laws.

Additionally, while immigrants can help boost the economy in their new country, they may also send remittances back to their countries of origin, benefiting those economies as well. Despite these potential economic benefits, the process of economic assimilation for immigrants is often slow and challenging, marked by setbacks and discrimination.

### **5. Challenges of Cultural Assimilation**

Losing one's culture means no longer practicing or celebrating the traditions of one's background. This could mean no longer taking part in traditional festivals, important life ceremonies, or family food customs. This challenge is often hardest for children in immigrant families because of the clash between family traditions at home and the new culture outside. Children may feel pressure to do well in school and later in their careers, which can create hidden conflict between their parents' cultural values and what they believe, is expected in the new culture. In the worst cases, children may feel embarrassed by their own culture or even their parents.

Research shows that kids who feel this way are more likely to struggle with self-esteem, experience depression, and face a higher risk of suicidal thoughts. Programs like ethnic community schools can help prevent cultural loss by allowing children to participate in cultural activities and learn their parents' language. This lets them feel comfortable switching between their family culture and the new culture. Being able to balance both cultures has been shown to be the most effective way to keep a strong cultural identity.

### **5.1 Loss of Cultural Identity**

The most difficult and saddest part of cultural assimilation is when a person's sense of cultural identity is weakened or lost. This is often at the root of many challenges people face when adjusting to a new culture. How much cultural change or "acculturation" a person goes through often depends on how much of their original culture they've been able to keep or have been forced to let go. If someone can keep practicing their own traditions, they are less likely to feel socially isolated, marginalized, or pressured to change who they are. The more they are pushed to give up their customs, the more likely they are to feel a loss of identity.

Some people give up cultural practices by choice, while others feel pressured by outside forces, making a difference between voluntary and involuntary change. Studies show that being forced to give up cultural identity can harm a person's mental health, often leading to culture shock and, in extreme cases, even to psychological issues. Even when people change their culture by choice, it can sometimes have negative effects. For example, a study of Canadian Aboriginals found that those who had lost their native language and fully adopted English culture were less mentally healthy than those who kept some of their original customs. This study highlights how important it can be to hold onto parts of one's original culture, even in a new environment.

### **5.2 Social Integration Issues**

Minority immigrant workers often feel pressured to learn the majority language and assimilate into the dominant culture. Wilson and Portes (1980) found that Hispanic immigrant workers faced exploitation by Anglo employers who refused to pay fair wages. To avoid this treatment, many immigrants sought jobs where speaking English wasn't necessary. Although these low-skill jobs often

paid less, immigrants appreciated that English fluency wasn't required. Immigrants generally believe learning English can improve their economic situation and protect them from exploitation.

However, native-born citizens sometimes misinterpret immigrants' self-segregation and efforts to maintain their culture as an unwillingness to integrate into American society. Factors like marrying within their community and limited English skills are often seen as signs that Hispanic and Asian immigrants don't want to assimilate, even though this is not the case. Such misunderstandings harm immigrant groups' chances of upward mobility, as both institutional and personal discrimination show that the path to assimilation is neither quick nor easy for many.

### **5.3 Discrimination and Prejudice**

Discrimination is when people are treated unfairly because of their race, age, or other differences. This unfair treatment is a serious issue today and a focus for many sociologists. Discrimination can lower a person's self-esteem and self-worth, leading them to believe negative stereotypes about their group, which can harm their mental health. For example, discrimination is often linked to depression, anxiety, and stress. Throughout history, discrimination has frequently led to violence and conflict. It has been behind some of the worst acts of genocide, like the Holocaust, and has fueled both international and domestic conflicts.

Cultural diversity is an inherent aspect of human societies, and history is filled with both the blending and clashing of different cultures. While it may be unrealistic to expect every culture to harmonize perfectly with others, successful assimilation relies on a mutual understanding and respect for cultural differences and traditions. Assimilation will always play a role in human history, and each culture brings unique contributions to its interactions with others. Ultimately, whether these encounters are positive depends on the willingness of all involved to embrace and appreciate these differences.