

# CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN THE DISCOURSE OF EDUCATION AND TEACHING: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A FEMALE COLOMBIAN IMMIGRANT IN ACADEMIA IN THE UNITED STATES

BY PAOLA ALBARRAN  
WEST TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

## INTRODUCTION

This study is an exploration of the cross-cultural adaption experience of the researcher as a female Colombian immigrant in academia coming from a Hispanic-heritage culture. The research focuses on the role that I have played as a college teacher in the host cultural environment and the way I have undergone throughout the process of my adaptation. This study aims to understand what the barriers were, how I went through in spite of obstacles, and what it meant to explore the cross-cultural adaptation as a long-term process to adjust and feel comfortable in a new culture. I hope my story offers institutions, local community members, and other international students who want to become college teachers, a unique perception of the characteristics of a teacher of color's lived experiences and a drive to change the culture toward diversity.



## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Cross-cultural adaptation** refers to "the process of change over time that takes place within individuals who have completed their primary socialization process in one culture and then come into continuous prolonged first-hand contact with a new and unfamiliar culture" (Kim, 1988, p. 37). Cross-cultural adaptation always takes place when an individual (immigrant) move from one society to another.

Immigrants are required to "relocate to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (Kim, 1988, p. 31). **Adaptation** is fully achieved when "the internal transformation of an individual challenged by a new cultural environment increases the fitness and compatibility in that environment" (Kim, 1988, p. 9).

## CONNECTING THE PERSONAL TO THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE

- **The initial adjustment:** I arrived on January 19, 2009, and started living on-campus at WTAMU. I was a twenty-four-year-old woman starting a new life in a host country that I was not very familiar with/English as a Second Language/Master's in Communications.
- **Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation:** I maintained relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional responses in the context of assimilation and integration. However, I experienced a variety of challenges trying to make the adaptation successful.
- **Learning a New Language/Adaptation, Assimilation, and Acculturation:** Marginalization was not an option for me. Immigrants who simultaneously rejected the culture -do not learn the language and had little social interaction with the host culture- could have the lowest levels of cross-cultural adaptation (Hoota & Ting-Toomey, 2013).
- **Immigration: Integration, Change, and the U-Curve:** I wanted to adapt to my new cultural environment, but I also wanted to influence the culture reciprocally.
- **The crisis and The Regained Adjustment:** The more I have been exposed to the host culture, the more I recognized a cross-cultural adaptation experience in different fields: education, family, food, language, music, religion, cultural adjustment, and relationship with others.
- **Adaptation and Acculturation/Integration and Change:** Living in this country has provided me with opportunities to find places for myself by exploring what both cultures (Hispanic and American) have affected my life and teaching experiences. My cross-cultural teaching experience has contributed to an increased acculturation of the host culture and a minimum level of deculturation of my childhood culture. I have never marginalized myself or rejected the host culture; contrary, it is thanks to my higher levels of social interaction with the American culture that I have gained the necessary insights and skills to adapt and acculturate in the context of a diverse society.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on previous researches conducted on cross-cultural adaptation, assimilation, acculturation, and integration, the following questions were designed:

**RQ1.** What does it mean for a Colombian female college teacher to have a cross-cultural adaptation experience and how did I deal with some challenges during this transition?

**RQ2.** How does my cross-cultural teaching experience contribute to the general understanding of adaptation and acculturation in the context of a diverse society?

## METHOD:

This study implemented an **autoethnography** as a research method and as a way of representing the main themes. I used the theory of cross-cultural adaptation and Lysgaard's U-Curve model as methodological and theoretical approaches to investigate -as a social scientist-, a realistic understanding of my adaptation experience in the United States and examine whether I underwent challenges or was successfully acculturated. **The type of data collected was my personal experience in order to understand my cross-cultural adaptation.**

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Finding 1: Compared to American teachers, international educators struggle with additional challenges: complex academic material, different teaching strategies, unusual ways of interaction between instructors and students, dissimilar writing/speaking approaches, and particular methods of logical thinking.

Finding 2: The cross-cultural adaptation is becoming a culturally constructed exchange. Students and international teachers have different cultural backgrounds, perceptions, and experiences of education.

Finding 3: Marginalized and/or rejection to the host culture is not acceptable for foreign teachers; contrary, they should employ higher levels of social interaction in the host environment to gain the necessary insights and skills to adapt and acculturate in the context of a diverse society (Hoota & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Finding 4: The cross-cultural teaching experiences and the transnational form of living required international teachers to redraw the boundaries behind their culture of origin helping to the contributions of their development and experiences.

Finding 5: As a foreign teacher from a Hispanic heritage, my cross-cultural teaching experience has contributed significantly to the general understanding of adaptation and acculturation in the context of a diverse society by getting out of my zone of comfort and exploring new opportunities in the host environment.

Through this autoethnography, I seek to evoke empathy and provide encouragement to other female Colombian/Hispanic immigrants in academia in the United States.

"I STILL DO NOT FEEL FULLY ADJUSTED TO THE CROSS-CULTURAL TEACHING. HOWEVER, MY TWELVE YEARS OF LIVING IN THE HOST CULTURE HELPED ME TO EXPLORE THE CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AS A LONG-TERM PROCESS TO ADJUST AND FEEL COMFORTABLE IN A NEW CULTURE. MY STORIES OF CULTURAL ADAPTATION WILL NEVER END, NOR MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY."  
(ALBARRAN, 2020)