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# The Acculturation of Undergraduate Students through Research Methods (0163)

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## *Short Abstract*

In undergraduate degrees in the Social Sciences, research methods and the research dissertation are usually a compulsory component of the curriculum. The paper explores one consequence of incorporating these components in the Social Science discipline in terms of its relationship to pursuing a research-oriented career using the lens of acculturation theory. It posits that students who chose their discipline voluntarily and see some permanence in it would more likely integrate or assimilate into their discipline's research paradigms and lead them into a career related to research. However, those students pursuing a discipline which was not their first choice may be more likely to feel marginalised or segregated from their discipline's research paradigms and choose not to follow a research-aligned career. The paper explores the implications of employability for undergraduate students whose degree is weighted largely to the research components when their aim is not be a researcher.

## *Long Abstract*

### **Introduction and Background**

Ever since [Jenkins and Healey \(2005\)](#) suggested that students should have more training in research, the research methods and research project courses have gained a high academic value in the undergraduate curriculum in social sciences. Students thus often have to do compulsory research methods and project courses and are pushed into learning the norms and values of their disciplinary research culture ([Austin, 1996](#); [Becher & Trowler, 2001](#)) with sometimes little idea of its purpose in their learning journey and their employability ([XXX, 2012](#)).

At the postgraduate level, students are more informed and have autonomy in their choices of disciplines and hence voluntarily decide to become part of their disciplines' research norms and values ([Austin, 2002](#); [Mendoza, 2007](#)). This is not the same for the undergraduate students as their level of autonomy is less and this will be further explored using acculturation theory. Acculturation is

the process and extent by which people interact and become part of different cultures. Using acculturation as a lens, we will examine what are the possible strategies a students might adopt when faced with their discipline’s research culture at the undergraduate level.

## The Choice of Discipline

Undergraduate students’ acculturation into their discipline in higher education is dependent on three factors. Two of these factors are based [Berry \(1997\)](#); these are voluntariness and permanence. Voluntariness is to what extent the students entered voluntarily into their discipline whilst permanence looks at whether students see their move into the discipline as temporary or permanent. [Berry \(1997\)](#) suggests that there is a third factor called mobility (moving into a culture or culture being brought to them) but this was deemed to be quite similar to voluntariness in the contexts of students entering higher education and is not considered in this paper. However, we have added the factor of affinity i.e. the enjoyment or pleasure the student feels about being a part of that discipline as a factor in becoming part of a culture.

Students who have high voluntariness, permanence and affinity can possibly be described as those students whose first choice in their degree programme was to enter their discipline because they enjoy it and hope to make a strong career in this discipline (see Table ). Whilst students with low voluntariness, permanence and affinity would possibly be students where the discipline was not their first choice, do not particularly enjoy the discipline but it is studying the discipline to achieve a good undergraduate degree for a job other than in academia.

Table : Factors affecting choice of discipline in higher education

Factors	High	Low
<b>Voluntariness</b>	Choose to be in the discipline e.g. first choice of degree programme	Not first choice of discipline e.g. came through clearing
<b>Permanence</b>	Wants a career path in the discipline e.g. going onto being an academic	Intend to leave discipline at end of degree programme e.g. degree as only a means to be an university graduate
<b>Affinity</b>	Enjoys learning about only that particular discipline	Does not enjoy learning only about that particular discipline

## Engagement in the Discipline’s Research and Research Methods

Adapting [Berry \(1997\)](#) acculturation strategies, students may determine how they engage with a particular discipline’s research paradigm based on two questions, whether the students:

1. see value in understanding research paradigms in the larger academic world i.e. other disciplines
2. consider it valuable to learn only their discipline’s research paradigms

There are four possible strategies that students may use to adapt to their discipline culture depending on how they view these issues (see Table ). The first strategy is *integration*. In integration, the students are willing to value the research paradigms both of their own discipline as well as other disciplines. This suggests that these students may likely prefer an inter-disciplinary approach during

their higher education degree. If students are willing to value only their discipline's research paradigms but not any others', they are more easily *assimilated* into their discipline i.e. socialised. Both integration and assimilation will therefore tend to occur with students who have high voluntariness and permanence but will differ with students' affinity, i.e. students with high affinity to their discipline will most likely be assimilated. Alternatively, students may appreciate research paradigms in other disciplines but do not like their discipline and hence may become *segregated or separated* from their discipline's culture of thinking and doing research but may be happy to explore another discipline's research paradigm/ culture. Finally, students may not like any of the discipline's culture, whether their own or another's and would be ostracised from any academic culture and hence be *marginalised*. In both separation/segregation and marginalisation the students will perhaps be characterised by low affinity to their current discipline and voluntariness. They may however differ in their degree of permanence, with the marginalised student leaving the degree programme as early as possible whilst the segregated student may consider switching to another discipline.

Table : Acculturation strategies by students depending on the value they place on their disciplines' research paradigms (adapted from [Berry \(1997\)](#))

		Do you consider it valuable to maintain and understand your discipline's research paradigms?	
		Yes	No
Do you consider it valuable to understand research paradigms in other academic disciplines?	Yes	Integration	Separation/Segregation
	No	Assimilation	Marginalisation

## Implications

For those students who have integrated or assimilated into the discipline research paradigm culture, it may be that if they planned on careers where research is highly regarded, then by acquiring high grades on the research components of their degree, it will enable them to acquire these jobs easier. However, those students who are being segregated and marginalised within the discipline research paradigm culture because of the factors of voluntariness, permanence and affinity will possibly acquire lower grades on their research components of their degree as they lack engagement. As research components of the undergraduate degree tend to carry large weightings (in some degrees it can be a deciding factor on the degree award level), there has to be some policy to ensure that these students' degree awards are not penalised because lack of wanting a research-aligned career. Further research however has to be done to determine whether this model is accurate and if so how to

ensure segregated and marginalised students as well as integrated students get the most from their degree programme.

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