

Societies can remain distinct despite migration

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Countries around the world can retain distinct cultures despite migration, new research shows.

If immigrants retained all of their cultural traits—such as clothing, religion, language, morals and attitudes—in a new country, then ongoing migration would eventually mean all countries became indistinguishable mixtures of each culture.

But a new study by the University of Exeter shows that even a little "acculturation" (immigrants adopting elements of the culture they move into) preserves differences between societies.

The research reviewed evidence from numerous empirical studies of real-life acculturation, then used mathematical models to explore the effect of migration and acculturation on cultural diversity.

"Public debates concerning migration often proceed with little factual basis," said Dr. Alex Mesoudi, of the University of Exeter.

"Politicians such as Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage have made statements that immigrants cannot integrate, or that recent levels of immigration make this impossible.

"However, the evidence suggests that acculturation is common, with second and subsequent migrant generations shifting, sometimes substantially, towards the cultural values of their adopted [society](#).

"My research shows that surprisingly little conformist acculturation is required to maintain substantial differences between societies.

'Conformist' here means adopting the majority trait in your society. For example, for realistic migration rates where 10% of the population migrates each generation, then you need just a 20% or more chance of adopting the majority trait to maintain distinct cultural variation between societies."

Dr. Mesoudi said more research was needed to understand the elements

of individual behaviour that underlie acculturation, such as whether acculturation occurs via education, the mass media, or contact with people in workplaces.

But he said: "In the context of the models, we can tentatively conclude that acculturation rates are easily strong enough to maintain cultural traditions in the face of migration."

He added: "While the models here might counter extreme conservative claims that any level of migration is detrimental for the maintenance of cultural traditions, they also count against extreme liberal claims that migration can never be too high.

"For very high rates of migration (e.g. where half the population is replaced by immigrants in every generation) then cultural variation between societies is typically eroded completely.

"While such levels exceed modern-day [migration](#) rates, such a situation might resemble past colonisation events.

"The colonisation of the New World, for example, led to the elimination of cultural variation and replacement with European cultural values."

The paper, published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, is entitled: "Migration, acculturation, and the maintenance of between-group [cultural variation](#)."

More information: Alex Mesoudi et al, Migration, acculturation, and the maintenance of between-group cultural variation, *PLOS ONE* (2018). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0205573](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0205573)

Provided by University of Exeter

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