Language Difficulties, Cultural Conflicts, and Perceived Discrimination across Generations of Latino Youth

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INTRODUCTION
Acculturation has been defined as a process of cultural change that results when individuals are in contact with two or more cultures (Gil, Vega, & Dimas, 1994). The process of adjusting to a new culture or to a culture that is different from one’s family background can elicit a type of stress that has been termed acculturative stress (Berry, 2006). Research has generally revealed that acculturative stress is associated with psychological problems among Latinos (Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991). For example, Latino youth who experience high levels of acculturative stress, broadly defined, have been found to be at significantly higher risk of experiencing anxiety-related symptoms (Suarez-Morales & Lopez, 2009). Several studies have also demonstrated that acculturative stress among Latino youth has been associated with depression and suicidal ideation (Hovey & King, 1996) as well as engaging in drug use and suicide attempts (Canino & Roberts, 2001). Based on these findings from the literature, critically evaluating specific acculturation stressors that contribute to negative mental health outcomes may prove particularly advantageous.

There are several components of the acculturation process which can contribute to acculturative stress such as difficulties with language proficiency, discrimination, and competing cultural values between parents and youth (Vega, Zimmerman, Gil, Warheit, & Apospori, 1993). Among Latinos, language difficulties have been associated with low self-esteem and psychological distress (Rogler et. al., 1991) as well as behavior problems among Latino immigrant adolescents (Vega, Khoury, Zimmerman, & Gil, 1995). Other studies have found that acculturation conflicts among youth low in assimilation are associated with strained child and parent relationships (Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008) which can then contribute to internalizing problems (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). Finally, stressors associated with negative stereotypes and discrimination

ABSTRACT Acculturative stressors among Latino youth are associated with a number of adjustment difficulties. However, acculturative stressors across generations of Latino youth are not well documented. This study evaluates differences between first, second and third generation Latino youth in their perceptions of acculturative stress, including language difficulties, cultural conflicts, and perceived discrimination, using a predominately low-income, school-based sample. Results revealed that first generation youth endorse higher language difficulties while third generation youth endorse lower cultural conflicts. Evaluating specific stressors associated with acculturation can better assist in the development of interventions geared towards the needs of both immigrant and U.S.-born Latino families.
can lead to risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse (Rogler et al., 1991), youth internalizing problems, and lower self-esteem (Smokowski et al., 2007).

Latino youth in the U.S. include large numbers of first (immigrant), second (U.S.-born of immigrant parents), and third/later (U.S.-born of U.S.-born parents) generations. Although Latino youth who experience acculturative stress have been found to be at higher risk for psychological problems such as depression (Hovey & King, 1996), research has not consistently identified which components of the acculturation process are most stressful to these youth of such varied backgrounds. Previous research points to the notion that perhaps foreign-born youth endorse more language conflicts (Gil et al., 1994) while generational differences in cultural conflicts and perceived discrimination are not as extensive for these youth (Potochnick, Perreira, & Fuligni, 2012; Smokowski et al., 2008). Family generation status has not been consistently assessed in studies evaluating acculturative stress and therefore, there is little empirical research that assesses potential generational differences in acculturative stress.

**STUDY AIMS AND HYPOTHESES**

In this study, we build upon the existing research by systematically evaluating generational differences in three components of acculturative stress: language difficulties, cultural conflicts, and perceived discrimination among Latino youth. Based on previous findings and emerging literature, first generation youth are predicted to report higher language conflicts and cultural conflicts, and lower perceived discrimination than youth from second and third generation families.

**METHOD**

**PARTICIPANTS**

Participants included 254 Latino youth of predominately Mexican backgrounds (47.2% female, 52.8% male; 5th – 8th grade) and their parents drawn from four public schools in Los Angeles and Chicago. The sample included youth of first (immigrant youth; n = 96), second (US-born youth/immigrant parents; n = 112), and third (U.S.-born youth/parent(s); n = 46) generation backgrounds.

**MEASURES**

**Acculturative stress.** The Acculturative Stress Measure (Vega, Gil, Warheit, & Apospori, 1993; α=.74) consists of nine items and three subscales: perceived language difficulties (2 items, including “How often has it been hard to get along with others because you don’t speak English well?”), cultural conflicts (4 items, including “How often have you had problems with your family because you prefer a more American/U.S. way of life?”), and discrimination (3 items, including “How often are you treated unfairly because of your ethnic background?”). Each item was rated by youth using a 4-point Likert scale from “0” (Not at All) to “3” (“A Lot”).

**Demographics.** The child’s sex, age, grade in school, ethnic/Latino background, family composition, family income, and the child and parent’s nativity were also obtained.

**PROCEDURE**

Youth were recruited from 4 schools located in predominately low-income urban areas in Los Angeles and Chicago. Both English and Spanish-speaking families were notified of the study via phone by a Spanish-English bilingual researcher. Families were invited to participate in parent and youth interviews at the youth’s school. After signing a consent form (parents) and an assent form (youth), parents and youth were interviewed simultaneously, but in separate rooms and both were compensated for their participation.

Interviewers read the questions from the measures and the respondents pointed or verbally stated their answers, if applicable, with the aid of a response booklet. Both parent and child interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish as per the participant’s preference. Spanish translations of the measures were done using forward and back-translation and team consensus since each of the measures was originally available only in
English. The duration of the interviews was about two
hours. Participants’ names were kept confidential by
using ID numbers and participants were allowed to
withdraw from the study without penalty at any time.

RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The sample consisted of 120 girls (47.2%) and 134 boys
(52.8%) ages 10 to 14 years old (M = 12.4, SD = 0.97). The
youth’s family composition included parents who were
married (63.4%), single/never married (15.0%), separated
(10.6%), divorced (7.9%), and widowed (3.1%). The vast
majority of the families earned either less than $10,000
(37.0%), or between $10,000-$30,000 (42.9%) per year,
while fewer earned between $30,000-$50,000 (13.4%)
between $50,000-$100,000 (5.5%), or over $100,000 (1.2%).

ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AND FAMILY GENERATION

STATUS

Preliminary analyses were conducted to evaluate the
differences in the overall acculturative stress measure
across generations in order to compare the overall
findings to the findings of each of its subscales. A one
way ANOVA revealed significant differences across
the groups (F (2,251) = 6.33, p < .01). More specifically, as
can be seen in Table 1, first-generation youth reported
higher levels of acculturative stress relative to their third
generation counterparts (p<.05), which is consistent with
the study predictions. Since the goal of the study was to
evaluate the different components within acculturative
stress, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted
to examine family generation status as an independent
variable and language difficulties, cultural conflicts, and
perceived discrimination as the dependent variables. As
predicted, the overall test was found to be significant,
indicating differences between the groups across the
different acculturative stress components (Wilk’s Λ =
.811, F [6, 498] = 9.16, p < .001, multivariate r2 = .10). A
series of follow-up univariate ANOVAs were conducted
to further probe these differences between generations.
As predicted, language difficulties were significantly
different across generation groups, F(2,251) = 25.93, p <
.001, and cultural conflicts were marginally significant
across generations, F(2,251) = 2.63, p = .07. On the other
hand, contrary to the study hypotheses, no significant
differences were found across family generations for
perceived discrimination, F(2,251) = 0.59, p = .56.

Language difficulties and cultural conflicts (given
its marginal significance) were further evaluated to
determine the nature of the differences across first,
second, and third generations (these results are displayed
in Table 1). A series of one-way ANOVAs revealed that,
as predicted, first generation youth reported significantly
higher language difficulties than their second (p<.001)
and third (p<.001) generation counterparts. Additionally,
lower cultural conflicts were reported by third generation
youth when compared to both first (p <.05) and second
(p <.05) generation youth. No other group comparisons
were found to be significant across language difficulties
or cultural conflicts.

DISCUSSION

Using a school-based sample of Latino youth, this
study aimed to understand the potential differences
of language difficulties, cultural conflicts, and perceived
discrimination across generations. Acculturative
stress was found to be higher among first generation
youth, with these youth endorsing significantly higher
language difficulties, while perceived discrimination
was not significant across generations. Results also
yielded differences in these subscales when comparing
the youth’s generation status, with first generation youth
endorsing the highest levels of language difficulties and
third generation youth endorsing the lowest levels of
cultural conflicts.

This study highlights the importance of focusing on a
clearer definition of acculturation stressors rather than
conceptualizing acculturative stress globally. Separating
language difficulties, cultural conflicts, and perceived
discrimination revealed that immigrant Latino youth
were specifically vulnerable to language stressors, a
finding supported by previous literature (Gil et. al.,
Future studies should consider using the specific subscales rather than the overall acculturative stress measure and to develop additional measures that more extensively separate the various forms of stress that can be present among youth of immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. One limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature. Hence, future research should not only focus on further describing the type of stressors that affect youth from different family generations, but examine changes in these stressors over time, their impact on the child’s well-being, and the factors that protect these youth from the effects of these stressors.

Previous research points to the notion that immigrant youth are at lower risk for endorsing mental health problems when compared to their later generation counterparts (Peña, Wyman, Hendricks Brown, & Matt, 2008). Given that immigrant youth seem to be at higher risk for endorsing acculturative stress, especially language conflicts, factors that protect these youth must be explored. Qualitative and quantitative studies exploring resilience among immigrant youth could help elucidate the coping strategies that are used by these youth to ward off the effects of acculturative stress.
### TABLE 1

Mean Differences on Acculturative Stress and its Components by Family Generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>First Generation M (SD)</th>
<th>Second Generation M (SD)</th>
<th>Third Generation M (SD)</th>
<th>Overall Test</th>
<th>First vs. Second</th>
<th>First vs. Third</th>
<th>Second vs. Third</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acculturative stress</td>
<td>14.53 (3.76)</td>
<td>13.23 (4.04)</td>
<td>12.15 (3.88)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>†</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language difficulties</td>
<td>3.65 (1.53)</td>
<td>2.62 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.30 (0.59)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural conflicts</td>
<td>5.98 (1.84)</td>
<td>5.99 (2.26)</td>
<td>5.22 (1.99)</td>
<td>†</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived discrimination</td>
<td>4.91 (1.95)</td>
<td>4.63 (1.92)</td>
<td>4.63 (2.23)</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note, NS = not significant, †p < .10, *p < .05, and ***p < .001
REFERENCES


