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 JOURNAL OF
 ADOLESCENT
 HEALTH

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Original article

Trajectories of Cultural Stressors and Effects on Mental Health and Substance Use Among Hispanic Immigrant Adolescents



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Article history: Received September 12, 2014; Accepted December 17, 2014

Keywords: Cultural stress; Discrimination; Context of reception; Hispanic; Adolescent; Immigrant; Positive youth development; Depressive symptoms; Conduct problems; Substance use

 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: We sought to determine the extent to which initial levels and over-time trajectories of cultural stressors (discrimination, negative context of reception, and bicultural stress) predicted well-being, internalizing symptoms, conduct problems, and health risk behaviors among recently immigrated Hispanic adolescents. Addressing this research objective involved creating a latent factor for cultural stressors, establishing invariance for this factor over time, estimating a growth curve for this factor over time, and examining the effects of initial levels (intercepts) and trajectories (slopes) of cultural stressors on adolescent outcomes.

Methods: A sample of 302 recently immigrated Hispanic adolescents in Miami (median of 1 year in the United States at baseline) and Los Angeles (median of 3 years in the United States at baseline) was recruited from public schools and assessed six times over a 3-year period.

Results: Perceived discrimination, context of reception, and bicultural stress loaded onto a latent factor at each of the first five timepoints. A growth curve conducted on this factor over the first five timepoints significantly predicted lower self-esteem and optimism, more depressive symptoms, greater aggressive behavior and rule breaking, and increased likelihood of drunkenness and marijuana use.

Conclusions: The present results may be important in designing interventions for Hispanic immigrant children and adolescents, including those within the present wave of unaccompanied child migrants.

 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Cultural stressors, including perceived discrimination, context of reception, and bicultural stress, may have deleterious effects on well-being, depressive symptoms, conduct problems, and substance use among recently immigrated Hispanic adolescents. Interventions are needed to offset or reduce the effects of cultural stressors on these adolescents.

Conflicts of Interest: Preparation of this article was supported by grants DA026594 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and AA021888 from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to S.J.S., and by National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, grant 1UL1TR000460 to J.S.

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Results indicate targeting cultural stressors in interventions may have potential to improve well-being and decrease externalizing behaviors and substance use within this population.

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Compared to their white American counterparts, U.S. Hispanic adolescents report elevated symptoms of depression [1]; have higher rates of suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts [2]; have greater prevalence of aggressive and delinquent behavior [3]; tend to initiate cigarette, alcohol, and drug use at earlier ages [4]; and tend to be less involved in positive pursuits [5]. These health disparities may stem from population-level dynamics and the intergroup processes that result from these dynamics. Specifically, defensiveness toward immigrants at the national level may drive immigration-related cultural stressors at the individual level [6].

Large immigrant flows, especially when the immigrants are perceived as belonging to a similar ethnic group, may be perceived as threatening by members of the dominant cultural group [7]. Some non-Hispanic Americans view mass Hispanic immigration as a threat to U.S. national identity [8]. Some conservative commentators (e.g., [9]) have expressed concerns about undocumented immigrants (most of whom are Hispanic) and their effects on the U.S. social welfare and health care systems. Additionally, the present crisis involving arrival of thousands of unaccompanied Central American immigrant children has served to increase the polarization of U.S. attitudes toward Hispanic immigration [10]. The U.S. political climate regarding Hispanic immigration might therefore be characterized as ambivalent [11]. Such a climate may contribute to creating cultural stressors for Hispanic immigrants.

Cultural stressors and their effects on health outcomes

Cultural stressors that operate in the lives of Hispanic adolescents, and that are linked with negative mental health and risk-taking outcomes, include perceptions of discrimination [12], a negative context of reception (NCR) [13,14], and bicultural stress [15]. Perceived discrimination refers to negative interactions with others based on social group membership, such as being called derogatory names and being viewed with suspicion [16]. Context of reception refers to the opportunity structure available to immigrants within the receiving society [17]. Bicultural stress refers to challenges involved in balancing the expectations and demands of U.S. culture and one's culture of origin [15].

Although these three cultural stress indicators are often treated as unique constructs, they all involve discomfort for immigrants and their immediate descendants [15–17]. Immigrant groups that are culturally divergent from the dominant culture and perceived as threatening often perceive themselves as being discriminated against, being blocked from opportunities within the receiving society, and experiencing trouble reconciling their cultural heritage with the society of settlement [18,19]. Furthermore, the operationalization and measurement of these indicators suggest they are interrelated and may represent a broad construct of cultural stress.

For example, Forster et al. [13] found that perceived context of reception and bicultural stress predicted externalizing behavior among Hispanic immigrant adolescents. Schwartz et al. [20] found that perceived discrimination and NCR were correlated and predicted depressive symptoms among Hispanic adolescents

and parents. In short, Hispanic adolescents may perceive an ambivalent reception (including both discrimination and NCR) and/or may experience difficulty balancing the sometimes contradictory expectations of Hispanic and U.S. cultures. Our objectives of the present study were to examine the extent to which these stressors co-occur, the stability of this co-occurrence over time, and the implications of this co-occurrence for a range of mental health and risk-taking outcomes among recent immigrant Hispanic adolescents. Surveying recent immigrants, especially longitudinally, provides a picture of how cultural stressors impact these individuals' health early in their time in the United States.

It is important to examine effects of cultural stressors on a range of adolescent health outcomes—including positive youth development (e.g., self-esteem, optimism, and prosocial behavior), depressive symptoms, conduct problems (e.g., aggression and rule breaking), and substance use. Given Keyes's [21] characterization of positive and problematic outcomes as independent from one another, it is essential to examine whether cultural stressors impede positive development as well as predict maladjustment and risk. Such knowledge would inform the selection of potential outcome variables for interventions intended to reduce, or mitigate the effects of, cultural stressors.

Present study

In the present six-wave longitudinal study, we examined the trajectory of a latent cultural stressor variable consisting of perceived discrimination, NCR, and bicultural stress among a sample of Hispanic immigrant adolescents living in Miami-Dade and Los Angeles Counties. The use of two diverse, heavily Hispanic areas provided a more representative sample of the Hispanic adolescent population than that would have been available at either site alone. We modeled indices of positive youth development, depressive symptoms, externalizing behavior, and substance use as outcomes at the final study timepoint. We hypothesized that perceived discrimination, NCR, and bicultural stress would cluster onto a latent cultural stressors construct at each timepoint; and that the initial level and change trajectory of cultural stressors would negatively predict positive youth development and would positively predict depressive symptoms, externalizing behavior, and substance use.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 302 recently immigrated adolescents from highly Hispanic areas of Miami-Dade and Los Angeles Counties. Participants were recruited primarily from the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes. Adolescents were completing or entering the ninth grade at the time of the baseline assessment. The study was approved by the institutional review boards at the University of Miami, the University of Southern California, and each of the participating school districts.

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