



Original article

Psychological Distress Among Low-Income U.S.- and Foreign-Born Women of Mexican Descent: Impact of Acculturation



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: After testing the capacity of Kessler's psychological distress (K6) scale to measure equally across low-income Mexican-born women (n = 881) and U.S.-born women of Mexican descent (n = 317), this study assesses the impact of acculturation on this group's psychological distress.

Methods: We employ descriptive and confirmatory factor analyses to test the cross-cultural equivalence of K6. Multivariate and logistic regression is used to test the association between acculturation and psychological distress among low-income, Mexican-American women.

Results: The cross-cultural equivalence analysis shows that some of the scale's items have the capacity to measure psychological distress equally among participants. Regression results indicate that the more acculturated these women become, the greater their psychological distress is.

Conclusion: The study recommends that researchers emphasize the cross-cultural equivalence of their measures and suggests a heightened awareness among practitioners of the multidimensional impact of acculturation on clients of Mexican descent.

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Over the past 20 years, the United States has experienced one of the largest waves of immigration in its history, and foreign-born Latinos are among the fastest growing segments of the population. In 2006, this group numbered 17,690,524, reflecting an increase of 25% from 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) and Pew Hispanic Center (2007), the Latino population is predicted to constitute one-quarter of the U.S. population by 2050, with Mexican Americans accounting for more than half of this group. Among them, 48.4% is female (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007). Despite this demographic shift, studies focusing on the psychological distress of Latina women in the United States remain limited.

Previous research shows that the shift from a predominant Mexican culture to a predominant U.S. culture, which transpires with the process of acculturation, is accompanied by a change in

the psychological awareness among women of Mexican descent (Cabassa, Lester, & Zayas, 2007; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003). Perceptions of mental health among Mexican-born women may be different from those of their U.S.-born counterparts, particularly because some of the essential Mexican values believed to shape beliefs about mental health among Mexican-born women may not be as influential for their U.S.-born counterparts (Rodriguez, 1998; Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Cabassa et al., 2007). For example, a study by Cabassa and colleagues (2007) examined perceptions of depression between these two groups of women. The study found that a significantly larger proportion of U.S.-born women of Mexican descent (categorized as Americanized) viewed depression as a phenomenon related to biological, genetic, or chemical factors, while a majority of Mexican-born women associated depression with presence of interpersonal problems, such as family conflicts and lack of family support systems. Despite this difference in the cultural understanding of depression, there has been a lack of research testing simplified depression scales for cross-cultural equivalency.

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The Kessler psychological distress scale (K6), which combines a number of depression and anxiety symptoms, is widely used among researchers as an indicator of psychological distress or as a screening tool for mental illness (Drapeau, Beaulieu-Prevost, Marchand, Boyer, Preville, et al., 2010) and recently has been adopted for the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013). The K6 scale was deliberately constructed to contain items that function similarly across sociodemographic subgroups (Kessler et al., 2002; 2003), and the scale was adopted by the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) to assess psychological distress across racial/ethnic groups in the United States, including Mexicans/Mexican Americans (Bratter & Eschback, 2005). The K6 scale has been validated in at least 14 countries worldwide, including Mexico (Kessler et al., 2010). However, to our knowledge, this scale has never been tested for its capacity to measure mental health equally across Mexican- and U.S.-born women of Mexican descent.

This study represents an initial effort to examine whether the K6 scale is cross-culturally equivalent—that is, whether the items used to measure the construct are perceived identically across the two groups (Tran, 2009). It is assumed that primarily because of acculturation—a process of change in cultural attitudes and behaviors as a result of an encounter between two cultures (Berry, 1997)—low-income Mexican- and U.S.-born women of Mexican descent differ in perceptions of psychological distress. This assumption is based on the understanding that particularly for the U.S.-born second generation immigrants, acculturation takes place in a social context. For them, the outcome of acculturation depends on multiple factors including family, community, and social considerations (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Contact with mental health services in the United States and the stigma associated with mental illness interact with immigrants' cultural beliefs and affect their perceptions of psychological distress. Recognizing the segmented nature of acculturation (e.g., Berry & Sabatier, 2010), researchers have noted that non-skilled (often low-income and/or unauthorized) immigrants present a unidirectional process of acculturation; that is, second- and third-generation immigrants tend to exhibit greater levels of accumulation to the host culture than previous generation members of an ethnic group. We hypothesize that Mexican- and U.S.-born women of Mexican descent differ in their ability to identify the K6 items as key aspects of their psychological distress. In this study, we seek to enable group-specific interpretation of the overall K6 score to increase our knowledge about psychological well-being among Latina women.

Literature Review

Acculturation, Psychological Distress, and Poverty

Most of the research on the impact of acculturation on the psychological distress of Mexican women shows a positive relationship between acculturation and psychological distress: the higher the level of acculturation among this group of women, the higher their psychological distress (Kurz, Baris & Davis, 2005; Acevedo, 2000; Gordon, 2007). Studies have also confirmed that compared to less acculturated women, the more acculturated women are more likely to suffer from depression (Shatel, Smith, Colwell & Villalba, 2008), have lower life satisfaction (Shatel et al., 2008), and be more prone to substance abuse (Moracco, Hilton, Hodges & Frasier, 2005). Research attributes several factors to healthier psychological profiles among less acculturated

Mexican immigrant women. More acculturated Mexican women tend to have a higher level of awareness about discrimination. A study that examined the impact of discrimination among low-income women of Mexican descent working at a factory found that the women who spoke English were asked to work harder and longer to help management communicate with workers who lacked English skills, but the women were not duly compensated for that assistance. Women in this study reported high psychological distress (Easter et al., 2000). In addition, less acculturated Mexican immigrant women often maintain strong networks for migration and early-stage settlement, which is seen as a positive moderating factor that diminishes the negative impact of acculturation (Vega, Gil, Zimmerman, Warheit, & Somers, 1993). Furthermore, Mexican cultural elements such as family cohesiveness and support and being family centered have been regarded as positive factors among less acculturated Mexican-born women (Hovey, 2000).

Nevertheless, Mexican cultural elements may lose their buffering effect on the negative impact of acculturation where low-income women of Mexican descent are concerned. Studies have found that regardless of their level of acculturation, low-income women of Mexican descent are likely to report higher levels of psychological distress than their high-income counterparts. (Hovey, 2000; Easter et al., 2006). Factors such as working long hours to meet their financial obligations, inability to balance the roles of mother and provider, lack of role models, and lack of support from their partners were linked with psychological distress among this group regardless of their acculturation level (Hovey, 2000; Coltrane, Parke & Adams, 2002; Gryzwacz et al., 2007). Therefore, it remains uncertain to what extent the level of acculturation and poverty interrelate and jointly affect the psychological distress of women of Mexican descent.

Mexican Culture, Acculturation, and Perception of Psychological Distress

Some studies indicate that less acculturated Mexican women report lower rates of psychological problems owing to different perceptions of their mental health. Several cultural values may eradicate the link as the women of Mexican descent in the United States become more acculturated, affecting their attitudes related to mental health (Rodríguez, 1998; Sabogal et al., 1987; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003). Some of the characteristics commonly identified in the Mexican culture that may shape how Mexican-born women perceive their mental health include *familismo*, *machismo*, and *marianismo* (Arredondo, 2002; Hinkelman, 2001).

Familismo denotes a strong affiliation with family members that translates into a sense of connectedness, collectivism, and interdependence. It is manifested by active participation in activities organized with family members. Mexican-born women perceive their health as a holistic unit encompassing spiritual, physical, emotional, and familial dimensions (Vega et al., 2000). Although some dimensions of familism, such as the importance of family support, do not change with acculturation (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Rodríguez, 1998; Sabogal et al., 1987), Lugo Steidel and Contreras (2003) found that more acculturated individuals adhered less to the overall principles of familism, especially beliefs of familial interconnectedness and familial honor. Consequently, for some women of Mexican descent in the United States, mental health may be associated more with biological, genetic, and chemical factors than with a range of salient factors that includes family relations (Cabassa et al., 2007).

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