



Challenges of Latino young men and women: Examining the role of gender in discrimination and mental health



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ABSTRACT

Research shows that ethnic-racial discrimination has a negative impact on individuals' mental health, specifically contributing to high rates of depression. The Latino population often experiences discrimination in the larger U.S. society. This has been especially true in recent years given the overall hostile climate toward Latinos in the U.S., with Latino young men often being portrayed negatively by the media, making them the most common targets of ethnic-racial discrimination and hostility. This study examined association between gender, perceived ethnic discrimination, and depressive symptoms by examining gender as both a potential risk factor and as a moderator. Two hundred fifty seven Latino young adults participated in the current cross-sectional study. The majority of participants experienced some perceived discrimination, and depressive symptoms were very high for both women and men. Our findings supported the hypothesis indicating that being a Latino male was a risk factor for experiencing more perceived discrimination, which in turn was associated with depressive symptoms. Gender did not significantly moderate an association between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. Our findings suggest that special attention should be paid to young Latino men who may be at increased risk for depression given the high instances of perceived discrimination they experience. The implications of these findings are further discussed and special recommendations for those working with Latino youth are specified.

1. Introduction

Latino immigrants are currently the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Census, 2016). The population currently stands at 57 million, making up 17.6% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2016). Latinos/as are living in a time when the United States is experiencing an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment. The current political climate, with its focus on anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric, has contributed to increased racial tensions for Latino immigrants (Almeida, Biello, Pedraza, Wintner, & Viruell-Fuentes, 2016). Popular media often portrays immigrants, especially immigrant men, negatively, suggesting they are violent, criminal, poor, and uneducated (Cerezo, 2016). As a result, Latino immigrants are experiencing increased instances of discrimination (i.e. unfair/negative treatment based on racial or ethnic background) and ethnic microaggressions (e.g. stereotyped messages based on a person's ethnic/racial background), which can have a significant impact on one's mental health (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017; Huynh, 2012).

It is well known that ethnic-racial discrimination is associated with

poor mental health (Cano et al., 2016; Molina, Little, & Rosal, 2016; Park, Wang, Williams, & Alegría, 2017). Numerous previous studies have found that experiencing discrimination can contribute to increased depression among Latino immigrants (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Chithambo, Huey, & Cespedes-Knadle, 2014; Flores et al., 2008). However, the inter-relatedness of gender, discrimination, and depression remains unclear. Rates of depression are approximately two times higher in women than in the overall population (see Salk, Hyde, & Abramson, 2017), and rates of depression are higher for Latina women than for Latino men (Mendelson, Rehkopf, & Kubzansky, 2008; Wassertheil-Smoller et al., 2014). However, studies indicate that Latino men may experience higher rates of discrimination (Lorenzo-Blanco, Unger, Oshri, Baezconde-Garbanati, & Soto, 2016). Given the strong relationship between discrimination and mental health, understanding the mechanisms of effect becomes especially important. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine how gender specifically plays a role in the relationship between perceived ethnic discrimination and depression among Latino young adults in the United States. Understanding the ways these components relate to one another is essential

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for improving the mental health of Latino people, who comprise a large proportion of the U.S. population.

1.1. Discrimination and mental health

Over the past several years, the rate of discrimination against the Latino population in the United States has been increasing (Krogstad & López, 2016). Studies in recent years by the Pew Research Center found that 52% of Latinos in the United States report having experienced discrimination or unfair treatment because of their race or ethnicity, a number that has increased by 11% since 2007 (Pew Research Center, 2007, 2017). Non-Latino Americans report they feel Latinos are discriminated against more than African Americans (Pew Research Center, 2010). Research suggests that Latinos report higher rates of discrimination than other minority groups (Huynh, 2012; Hwang & Goto, 2008). For example, a study conducted by Hwang and Goto (2008) revealed that Latino students were more likely to be accused of wrongdoing, breaking the law and cheating when compared to Asian students, and more likely to judge these experiences as stressful. In addition, rates of depression (Mendelson et al., 2008; Saluja et al., 2004) and hopelessness (Blackwell, Lucas, & Clarke, 2014) among Latinos seem to be high compared to other ethnic/racial groups. Increasing rates of discrimination, coupled with high rates of depression, therefore pose a significant risk for a growing segment of our population, and can have important implications for the overall public health that can impact employment rates and population mortality (Cassano & Fava, 2002).

Although discrimination is a common experience for many minority groups, studies suggests that Latinos may be exposed to more experiences of ethnic and/or racial discrimination than other minority groups. In a study conducted with Latino and Asian adolescents, Latinos reported more negative treatment and microaggressions than their Asian counterparts (Huynh, 2012). The study suggests that higher reports of negative treatment by Latino adolescents may reflect lower expectations and negative stereotypes about this particular group. In a similar study by Hwang and Goto (2008), results indicated that while Asian Americans and Latino college students both experienced discrimination, Latino students were more likely than Asian American students to have been accused of doing something wrong (e.g. cheating and breaking the law), and more likely to consider these experiences as stressful (Hwang & Goto, 2008).

Research has shown that discrimination could be a risk factor for poor mental health outcomes among Latino youth specifically because it has the potential to influence several areas of functioning, including psychological well-being. Current research suggests that, among young Latinos, perceived discrimination seems to be positively associated with depression (Chithambo et al., 2014; Delgado, Updegraff, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2011; Flores et al., 2008; Huynh, Devos, & Dunbar, 2012; Hwang & Goto, 2008; Torres & Ong, 2010). A study with first-generation immigrant Latino youth found that discrimination was associated with depression even after controlling for several migration-related stressors (e.g., being separated from caregiver, experiencing physical attack or robbery during migration) (Potochnick & Perreira, 2010). Some studies suggest that the impact of discrimination on depression is so strong that an experience of discrimination on a given day increases one's depression the next day (Torres & Ong, 2010). Similarly, results from a study conducted by Arbona and Jimenez (2014) examining undergraduate Latino students attending a diverse college campus showed that minority stress was positively associated with depression even after controlling for general college stress. More specifically, this study found the students' perception of the campus climate as unwelcoming to Latinos to be directly associated with depressive symptoms. The results suggest that discrimination and the perception of an unwelcoming climate is present even in culturally diverse environments.

1.2. Gender and mental health

Depression appears to be high among Latinos in the United States. A large study revealed that 27% of Latinos reported high levels of depressive symptoms (Wassertheil-Smoller et al., 2014), compared to 8.1% of American adults overall (Brody, Pratt, & Hughes, 2018). This high prevalence of depressive symptoms among Latinos have become a concern in the United States and many researchers, practitioners, and members of the medical community have sounded the alarm over the astounding negative effects of depression on public health (McLaughlin, 2011; De Oliveira, Cianelli, Gattamorta, Kowalski, & Peragallo, 2017). For example, high rates of depression have been linked to increased rates of delinquency among Latinos (Jennings et al., 2018) and high levels of suicide ideation (Yeguez, Hill, Buitron, & Pettit, 2018). Rates of depression have been increasing for both women and men, and young adults in particular, in the past decade (Twenge, 2015; Weinberger et al., 2017). However, researchers consistently find that rates of depression among young women tend to be higher than among young men, with some studies indicating that twice as many women experience depression as men (Salk et al., 2017). A few studies suggest similar patterns among Latino population in the United States, with rates of depression among Latina women overall tending to be higher than rates of depression among Latino men (Bandiera et al., 2015; Mendelson et al., 2008).

1.3. Discrimination and gender

Numerous studies suggest that Latino males are exposed to more experiences of discrimination than their female counterparts (Huq, Stein, & Gonzalez, 2016; Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2016; Perez, Fortuna, & Alegria, 2008), and that they also report having less positive experiences (Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2016). However, findings are mixed regarding whether or not discrimination affects the mental health and well-being of Latino men differently from Latina women in the United States. Several studies have found different associations between discrimination and mental health challenges for Latino males and Latina females. For example, Lorenzo-Blanco and colleagues found that, although Latino male adolescents reported higher rates of perceived discrimination, adolescent girls who experienced discrimination tended to report higher levels of depressive symptoms than Latino boys (Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2016). Another study conducted by Nair, White, Zeiders, and Roosa (2013), which surveyed 710 Mexican American youth, found that girls reported higher levels of internalizing behaviors, whereas boys reported higher levels of externalizing behaviors. This suggests that when facing discrimination, women tend to exhibit anxiety and/or mood related symptoms, whereas men tend to exhibit symptoms related to conduct disorders, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders and/or oppositional defiant disorders (Nair et al., 2013). A different study found that Latino men reported that their levels of well-being tended to be lower when their discrimination stress was high (Piña-Watson, Dornhecker, & Salinas, 2015). This finding suggests that the level of discrimination in particular may be important in predicting depression or other mental health difficulties. The researchers suggested that the high impact discrimination has on males' well-being might be due to how Latino men and women are socialized. Traditionally, many Latino families operate under the cultural norms that are rooted in patriarchy that can often lead to men having more power and achieving a higher status. Therefore, when confronted with discrimination they might experience feelings of disempowerment, which may lead to them developing more severe mental health symptoms than women. On the contrary, Latina women often develop greater coping skills that can help them deal with their discrimination stress (Piña-Watson et al., 2015). This finding is echoed by other researchers who indicate that Latino young men are often provided with more opportunities to explore various domains outside of their family, whereas young Latina women are encouraged to learn the importance of the

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