



## Generational patterns in Mexican Americans' academic performance in an unwelcoming political context



Danyel A.V. Moosmann<sup>a,1</sup>, Mark W. Roosa<sup>a,\*</sup>, George P. Knight<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 852870-3701, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 852870-1104, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Research has shown that immigrant students often do better academically than their U.S.-born peers from the same ethnic group, but it is unclear whether this pattern holds for Mexican Americans. We examined the academic performance of four generations of Mexican American students from 5th to 10th grade looking for generation differences and explanations for them. Using data from 749 families, we tested a model with 5th-grade variables that differed by generation as potential mediators linking student generation to 10th-grade academic performance. Results showed that immigrants were academically behind at 5th grade but caught up by 7th. Only economic hardship mediated the long term relation between student generation and 10th-grade academic performance; maternal educational expectations and child language hassles, English usage, discrimination, and mainstream values helped explained the early academic deficit of immigrant children. The results identified potential targets for interventions to improve Mexican American students' academic performance.

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Over the past two decades, researchers, educators, and policy makers have given increasingly close attention to the academic performance of Mexican Americans for two reasons. First, Latinos are the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S.) with Mexican Americans accounting for about two-thirds of the Latino population as well as 15.7% of children enrolled in U.S. schools (Motel & Patten, 2012). A substantial portion of the Mexican American population was not born in the U.S.; 29% of Mexican origin adults (Motel & Patten, 2012) and 13% of Mexican origin children are immigrants (The Urban Institute, 2012). Second, Mexican Americans have higher rates of academic failure and dropout than European Americans, African Americans, and other Latinos (dropout rate of 25% versus 7%, 12%, and 21%, respectively; Pew Hispanic Center, 2004). Academic problems of this magnitude are a serious issue given the long term individual and societal costs of the associated increased risk of physical and mental health problems (Pleis, Ward, & Lucas, 2010), reduced employment opportunities and earning power (Center for Labor and Market Studies, 2009), and increased rates of incarceration (Harlow, 2003).

Several researchers have reported evidence, often from studies using large nationally representative samples, of an immigrant paradox in academic performance. These studies show that first-generation (immigrant) children (in some studies, immigrants and children born to immigrants) have stronger school attachments, higher academic

motivation, and better academic performance than later-generation peers from the same ethnic group (Fuligni, 1997; Han, 2012; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Researchers also have reported that, although first-generation children may lag behind in early academic performance (perhaps because of language), they may catch up quickly to the academic performance of later-generation children because of their motivation to succeed (e.g., Crosnoe, 2006, 2012; Han, 2012; Palacios, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Some scholars have argued that children of immigrants may be best situated for academic success given that they often share the motivation and work ethic of first-generation children but have better English skills (e.g., Conger & Atwell, 2012).

Despite considerable evidence in support of an immigrant paradox in academic performance, results often have differed between, and even within, studies by developmental status, ethnic group, and geographic location. Evidence of an immigrant academic paradox has been more likely when studying adolescents rather than younger children (Crosnoe, 2012; Palacios, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), whereas evidence of the rapid “catching up” pattern among immigrants has been more likely when studying younger children rather than adolescents (Palacios, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Moreover, immigrant advantages may emerge only when researchers statistically control for economic disadvantage; immigrants may perform as well as or better than their U.S.-born peers only when compared to others in the same social strata (Crosnoe, 2012). Finally, there is evidence that the relative academic performance of students by generation may vary by geographic location perhaps because of (a) the local population density of immigrants or members of their ethnic group, (b) the extent

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mark.roosa@asu.edu (M.W. Roosa).

<sup>1</sup> The first two authors made equal contributions to this paper; their names are in alphabetical order.

of community-wide economic disadvantage, and/or (c) the degree to which a community welcomes (or resists) the arrival of immigrants (e.g., Conger & Atwell, 2012; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Although relatively few studies have focused on Latinos generally or Mexican Americans specifically, studies that included these groups often failed to find evidence of an immigrant paradox (e.g., Conger & Atwell, 2012; Crosnoe, 2006, 2012; Fuligni, 1997; Glick & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Moreover, other than indicators of social class (which is difficult to assess reliably for immigrants) and English language proficiency, studies of immigrants' academic performance rarely have included variables related to immigration or acculturation experiences that might account for generation differences. Similarly, studies rarely have examined pathways linking student generation to academic performance which would provide guidance for interventions. In this study, we focused on the academic performance of four generations of Mexican American students in one of the least accepting U.S. environments for Latinos generally and Latino immigrants particularly. Our goal was to identify characteristics and experiences of Mexican American students and their families that might help explain the relation between students' generation and academic performance longitudinally.

#### The current study

This study was conducted in Arizona, a state that has been a focal point for anti-immigrant/Latino sentiment and policies for more than a decade. Children in this study entered first grade in 2000 or 2001 and most graduated by the spring of 2013. Since entering first grade, several political and legal events impacted these students' educational and social contexts. In 2000, a law was passed banning bilingual education (Corella, 2000). In 2006, a law proclaimed the state's official language to be English (The Washington Times, 2006), although a similar law had been enacted years earlier and was still in effect. In 2010, new laws (a) banned the teaching of ethnic studies (classes focused primarily on the Latino experience; Santa Cruz, 2010), and (b) targeted Latinos by requiring police to ask for documentation of legal residency when officers suspected individuals to be in the U.S. illegally (Archibold, 2010). During this time, Arizona severely restricted non-English speaking students' access to English Language Learners' (ELL) services, a practice that ended only in 2012 (Ryman, 2012). Finally, for several years the sheriff of the most populated county in Arizona periodically conducted headline generating "crime suppression sweeps", raids designed to round up undocumented immigrants, almost exclusively Latinos (Hensley, 2012). Therefore, this study examined Mexican American immigrant students' academic performance relative to that of U.S.-born Mexican Americans in an environment that was unsupportive of the educational advancement of either in several ways.

This study was guided by the integrative model of developmental competencies of minority children which stresses the importance of assessing the influence of contextual variables such as social class, culture, and ethnicity (García Coll et al., 1996). Of course, minority children's development is affected by all or most of the same factors that influence development in the majority population. Our understanding of the development of minority children, however, will be incomplete unless we also study factors unique to their experiences as minorities (e.g., cultural beliefs, discrimination). The integrative model also encourages researchers to use longitudinal designs and assess intra-group variability.

While acknowledging the importance of demographic variables in helping us understand generation differences in academic performance, we avoided using common indicators of socioeconomic status (e.g., family income, parent education) which have been prominent in prior studies. The education systems of Mexico and the U.S. are not identical; access to a free education, particularly at the secondary level, is easier in the U.S. and there are different intensities of learning at different levels in the two systems (Roosa, Deng, Nair, & Burrell, 2005). Furthermore, the

value of any particular level of education in Mexico to an immigrant parent's earning potential in the U.S. is less than that of a similar level of education acquired in the U.S. Similarly, negotiating the education system in Mexico does not help immigrant parents understand U.S. schools' expectations. Finally, measuring the income of immigrants who sometimes rely on day labor, often get paid in cash on a daily basis or at irregular intervals, and sometimes do not receive end of the year reports of their cumulative income (i.e., W2 forms) is much less reliable than getting this information from persons with steady jobs, regular paychecks, and annual reports of total income from their employers. Instead of relying on these questionable data, we assessed the adequacy of financial resources by asking families whether their finances met their basic monthly financial needs (i.e., economic hardship).

Here we briefly summarize our systematic search for variables that might contribute to variation in Mexican American students' academic performance by generation. Because of space limitations, we do not describe the measures used or provide statistical results, but these are available online at [http://psychology.clas.asu.edu/sites/default/files/supplemental\\_file\\_for\\_generational\\_patterns\\_in\\_mexican\\_americans.pdf](http://psychology.clas.asu.edu/sites/default/files/supplemental_file_for_generational_patterns_in_mexican_americans.pdf). Using variables available from a longitudinal study of a diverse sample of Mexican American families, we generated a list of variables that potentially could differentiate the experiences of these families by generation according to the integrative model (García Coll et al., 1996) and previous research (e.g., Fuligni, 1997; Table 1). Although we chose several variables that had been included in earlier studies (indicated by an <sup>a</sup> in the table), we purposely sought out variables not yet examined. These included family variables (e.g., family cohesion), student variables (e.g., perceived discrimination), classroom variables (e.g., teacher reports of on-task behavior), cultural variables (e.g., mainstream values), and community variables (e.g., the percent of foreign-born residents). As an example of the logic behind these choices, we

**Table 1**  
Variables Considered for Inclusion in Theoretical Model and Those Chosen.

Category	Variables considered	Differentiated generations	Included in model
Family variables	Family cohesion		
	Economic hardship	✓	✓
	Parental depression <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓
	Parental substance abuse	✓	
	Parental deviance		
	Exposure to Mexico <sup>a</sup>	✓	
	Parent educational aspirations	✓	
	Parent educational expectations	✓	✓
	Parental educational values	✓	
	Parental employment <sup>a</sup>	✓	
	Student variables	English usage <sup>a</sup>	✓
Relational aggression			
Conduct disorder <sup>a</sup>			
Association with deviant peers			
School aspirations and expectations <sup>a</sup>			
Language hassles		✓	✓
Perceived discrimination		✓	✓
Gang involvement			
School attachment <sup>a</sup>			
Academic self-efficacy <sup>a</sup>			
Teacher variables		Child on-task behavior	
	Child learning behavior		
Cultural variables	Parent mainstream values	✓	
	Parent familism values	✓	
	Child mainstream values	✓	✓
	Child familism values	✓	
Community variables (% of tract)	Foreign-born	✓	
	Latinos	✓	
	Families in poverty	✓	
	Latinos in poverty	✓	
	Latinos graduated from high school	✓	
School variables (% of students)	Eligible for free lunch <sup>a</sup>	✓	
	Latinos	✓	

<sup>a</sup> Variables known to have been included in prior studies of generation differences.

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