

Short communication

## The influence of attitudes, acculturation, and gender on substance use for Mexican American middle school students

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### Abstract

The present study tested if current drug use was related to acculturation (measured by language spoken at home), gender, or youth attitudes towards drugs in a large sample of 8th grade, predominantly Mexican American, Hispanic youth. The data were obtained via self-report survey from 2964 Hispanic youth in 108 schools. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was used to test if acculturation, gender, or youth attitudes towards drugs predicted past 30-day use of alcohol, inhalant, or marijuana use and assess school-level influences. Acculturation and gender interacted with attitudes towards drugs to predict current alcohol use. Gender interacted with attitudes towards drugs to predict current alcohol and inhalant use. Having positive attitudes towards drugs was related to increased substance use for all three drug types. Hispanic eighth grade girls had significantly higher use rates than boys for both alcohol and inhalants. Additional research is needed to better understand the influence of acculturation on substance use among Hispanic youth.

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*Keywords:* Adolescent substance use; Mexican American youth; Attitudes towards drugs; Acculturation and substance use

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### 1. Introduction

Much of the research examining the influence of risk factors on substance abuse has been based upon studies of Anglo-American adolescents and may not apply to ethnic minority groups. Understanding

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variables that may be influenced by differences related to culture and their relationship to substance use has the potential to enhance substance abuse prevention efforts. Hispanic students in the 8th grade report the highest usage rates for nearly all classes of drugs compared to Anglo and African-American students (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2005) and the largest subgroup of Hispanics are Mexican descendants (66% in 2000). Thus, better understanding of substance use and associated risk factors is warranted among Mexican American adolescents.

### *1.1. Adolescent attitudes, acculturation, and gender influences on substance use*

An individual's beliefs and attitudes about drugs have great influence on whether or not they actually use them and permissive attitudes towards drug use have been found to be associated with increased risk for use (Danseco, Kingery, & Coggeshall, 1999). Acculturation and gender have also been investigated as factors related to substance use among Hispanic youth. Vega and Gil (1998) found that Hispanic adolescents reporting higher levels of acculturation tend to report higher levels of alcohol and marijuana use than less acculturated peers. Prior research of Hispanic students has shown that for older students, boys report higher lifetime use rates for most drug types than girls, but that in younger students girls report higher lifetime use rates of drugs and alcohol than boys (Wallace et al., 2003).

Gender, acculturation, and attitudes towards drugs impact substance use among youth at varying developmental levels and across ethnicities and interactions among these variables in Mexican American youth have received only cursory study. The following two research questions were posed for middle school aged Mexican American students: 1) *Are youths' attitudes toward drugs related to their current drug use?* and 2) *Does acculturation or gender moderate the relationship between attitudes toward substances and current drug use.* In addition, the influence of school characteristics on drug use was investigated using HLM.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Participants and procedures*

Eighth grade students from a southwestern state were surveyed in spring of 2004 as part of a project gathering information on adolescent health and risk factors. After validity checks, there was a school-level sample of 18,702 surveys. A student-level sample of 2964 Hispanic students was created from the larger sample that consisted of 1273 (42.9%) males and 1691 (57.1%) females ranging in age from 12 to 16 years ( $M=13.6$ ;  $SD=0.6$ ).

### *2.2. Survey instrument and variables*

The survey instrument was based on the *Communities That Care Youth Survey* (Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, & Baglioni, 2002) and was administered in English. From this survey, an attitude toward drugs scale was used that consisted of four Likert-type items. Similar to other studies, language spoken at home (English or Spanish) was used as a measure of acculturation. The dependent variables were youth self-report of number of occasions in the past 30-days that substances were used for alcohol, marijuana, and inhalants.

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