



Risky behaviors and educational attainment among young Mexican-origin mothers: The role of acculturative stress and the educational aspiration–expectation gap



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 October 2014

Received in revised form

17 December 2015

Accepted 12 February 2016

Available online 16 March 2016

Keywords:

Acculturative stress

Educational aspirations

Educational expectations

ABSTRACT

The current longitudinal study examined how Mexican-origin adolescent mothers' ($N = 204$) reports of acculturative stress during late adolescence were associated with their educational attainment and engagement in risky behaviors in young adulthood, 4 years post-partum; we also examined whether this association was mediated by discrepancies between adolescents' educational aspirations and expectations. Findings revealed that mothers' greater reports of stress regarding English competency pressures and pressures to assimilate were associated with a larger gap between their aspirations and expectations. Mothers' reports of greater stress from pressures against assimilation, however, were associated with a smaller gap between aspirations and expectations. As expected, a larger gap between aspirations and expectations was associated with lower educational attainment and increased engagement in risky behaviors. Finally, significant mediation emerged, suggesting that the influence of stress from English competency pressures and pressures to assimilate on young mothers' educational attainment and engagement in risky behaviors was mediated through the aspiration–expectation gap. Findings are discussed with respect to understanding discrepancies between young mothers' aspirations and expectations in the context of acculturative stress.

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1. Risky behaviors and educational attainment among young Mexican-origin mothers: the role of acculturative stress and the educational aspiration–expectation gap

Latinos are the largest ethnic population in the United States (U.S.), and the Latino population is among the fastest growing ethnic groups in the nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Despite the growing presence of Latinos in U.S. schools, Mexican-origin youth experience the highest dropout rates of all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. (23.2%), followed by American Indian/Alaska Native (17.6%) and Black (12.9%) youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), and consequently a lower likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree, compared to their higher-performing non-Latino White and Asian immigrant

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counterparts (Fry, 2010). Further, Latino youth also have high rates of engagement in risk behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex, smoking, alcohol abuse, physical fighting) compared to non-Latino youth (Kann et al., 2014). In particular, Mexican-origin adolescent mothers, who have the highest birthrates in the U.S. among all racial/ethnic groups (National Vital Statistics Report, 2013), are at significant risk for experiencing educational underachievement (Motel & Patten, 2012) and engagement in risky behaviors (Assini-Meytin & Green, 2015; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2009) due, in part, to low income (Hoffman, 2006), social stratification in school systems (Lamb & Markussen, 2011), and high rates of school dropout (Rumberger, 2011). Given that these indices of adjustment have been linked to employment earnings, health behaviors, and offspring's developmental outcomes (Borkowski, Whitman, & Farris, 2007), a comprehensive understanding of factors that inform young mothers' educational attainment and engagement in risky behavior is warranted.

In the current study, we hypothesize that disparities in educational and behavioral adjustment among Mexican-origin adolescent mothers may be attributed to unique cultural stressors faced by Latino youth as a result of the pressures associated with the acculturation process (e.g., language difficulties, discrimination, differing cultural values; Rodriguez, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2000). Prior work with Latino youth has found that acculturative stress, or stressors experienced by immigrant groups during the process of adapting to a dominant culture (Berry, 2006), are associated with poor school performance (Roche & Kuperminc, 2012) and engagement in risky behaviors (Forster, Grigsby, Soto, Schwartz, & Unger 2015; Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000). Despite the growing representation of Latino immigrants in the U.S. and teen mothers' high risk for poor adjustment, limited work has examined the role of distinct aspects of acculturative stress (e.g., English/Spanish competency pressures, pressures to or against assimilation), as well as the process through which acculturative stress may inform educational and behavioral adjustment. The current study contributes to the scant literature underscoring the role of multidimensional aspects of acculturative stress on youths' adjustment, particularly among at-risk underrepresented groups, such as Mexican-origin teen mothers.

Acculturative stress may ultimately contribute to young mothers' educational and behavioral adjustment by impacting the formation of their self-concept, educational goals, and resultant behaviors via perceptions of limited resources (e.g., financial constraints; Lueck & Wilson, 2011). Prior work suggests that challenges associated with the stress of adaptation to cultural expectations may lower immigrant youths' hopes or aspirations for future educational attainment (Plunkett & Bámaca-Gómez, 2003; Yowell, 2002). A concept closely related to educational aspirations is the concept of educational expectations (i.e., realistic self-estimates for educational attainment; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001), which has been regarded as equally critical to achievement and developmental adjustment (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Research suggests that when youth aspire to achieve more than they actually expect to achieve (i.e., larger aspiration–expectation gap), they are more inclined toward disengagement from school and behavioral issues (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011), compared to those with a smaller aspiration–expectation gap. This notion has been termed academic disidentification (Steele, 1997), and refers to the act of devaluing or psychologically disengaging (e.g., lowering aspirations, expectations) from schooling domains, leading to academic underachievement and delinquent behavior (Griffin, 2002). Academic disidentification has been recognized as a protective mechanism used by individuals during psychologically threatening situations (e.g., experiences with acculturative stress). Mexican-origin adolescent mothers, who experience social stigmas both as young mothers (SmithBattle, 1995) and as members of an ethnic minority group (Rodriguez et al., 2000), may be particularly vulnerable to academic disidentification. The discrepancy between aspirations and expectations may be a byproduct of internalized social disadvantages, such that young Mexican-origin mothers who experience the pressures of acculturative stress may have difficulty matching their aspired selves with their expected selves, which ultimately impedes their educational attainment and places them at risk for engagement in risky behaviors.

Researchers propose that gaps between ethnic minority youths' educational aspirations and expectations may be attributed to incongruence between their ideological perceptions of the U.S. *American Dream* alongside greater barriers (e.g., child rearing responsibilities) to fulfilling those dreams (Yowell, 2002). Similarly, pressures associated with the assimilation process may elicit feelings of limited resources, which decrease young Mexican-origin mothers' educational self-concept (e.g., internalized beliefs regarding academic capabilities), and consequently increase the gap between their educational aspirations and expectations. Limited work, however, has investigated the impact of specific cultural stressors on the gap between ethnic minority youths' educational aspirations and expectations. This process may be particularly salient for Mexican-origin adolescent mothers in the years following their pregnancy and in young adulthood, a critical developmental period marking the beginning of social maturity and new opportunities for educational investment (i.e., obtaining higher education). Guided by possible selves (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006) and acculturative stress perspectives (Berry, 2006), the current study examined the impact of young Mexican-origin mothers' reports of acculturative stress in relation to discrepancies between their educational aspirations and expectations, and how these stressors and discrepancies informed their adjustment (i.e., educational attainment and risky behavior engagement) over time.

2. Acculturative stress and young Mexican-origin mothers' adjustment

Acculturative stress can be understood as individuals' responses to the pressures associated with events surrounding interactions between cultures throughout the process of acculturation (Berry, 2006). These stressors include feelings of being marginalized due to cultural differences (Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987), and may derive from both the dominant or heritage culture, and entail pressures to retain and/or reject aspects of the dominant and heritage culture (e.g., English/Spanish competency pressures, pressures to assimilate, pressures against assimilation; Rodriguez, Myers, Mira,

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