Acculturation among Mexican-heritage preadolescents: A latent class analysis

Tanya Nieri [a,*], Chioun Lee [b], Stephen Kulis [c], Flavio Francisco Marsiglia [d]

[a] Sociology Department, University of California at Riverside, 1216 Watkins, Riverside, CA 92521, United States
[b] Sociology Department, Rutgers University, 26 Nichol Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-2882, United States
[c] School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 873701, Tempe, AZ 85287-3701, United States
[d] School of Social Work, Arizona State University, 411 North Central Avenue, Suite 800, Phoenix, AZ 85004-0689, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study applies advanced conceptualization and measurement to an analysis of acculturation among 1632 Mexican-heritage preadolescents. We assessed whether – and how – multiple measures combine to form a latent acculturation construct that groups individuals into classes; and determine how many and what classes (or types) of acculturation are experienced by this sample of 5th graders. Measures included attitudinal, behavioral, and linguistic acculturation, generation status, time in the US, ethnic identification, and contact with the culture of origin. The analysis identified five classes of acculturation, differing in size and characterized by specific measures of acculturation: less acculturated, moderately bicultural, strongly bicultural, highly acculturated, and marginalized. Although most youths fell into the first four classes, consonant with their exposure to American society, a small minority of youths fell into the last class. Despite substantial exposure to US culture and recent exposure to Mexican culture, these youth showed little affinity for either culture.

1. Introduction

Acculturation is a multidirectional cultural change process (Berry, 2003) triggered by intercultural contact which produces changes in attitudes, norms, behaviors, knowledge, and identity (Berry, 2007). An extensive literature documents acculturation's relationship with numerous health and social outcomes, many of which are undesirable. Among studies conducted with youths, for example, greater acculturation to American culture has been linked to substance use (Marsiglia et al., 2005; Marsiglia and Waller, 2002), obesity (Popkin and Udry, 1998), lower academic achievement (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001), and early sexual activity (Adam et al., 2005). Because of its impact on health, education and wellbeing, acculturation remains an important focus of study. However, numerous concerns have been raised about the way acculturation has been measured in prior research, and calls have emerged for a more advanced conceptualization of acculturation (e.g., Unger et al., 2007; Page, 2005; Hunt et al., 2004; Rudmin, 2003; Zane and Mak, 2003; Cabassa, 2003; Weigers and Sherraden, 2001).

One concern is that existing measures and conceptualizations do not account adequately for its multi-directionality (e.g., the adoption of mainstream culture, enculturation into the origin culture, and acculturation to other ethnic minority cultures), variable rates of acculturative change in different social arenas (family, school, neighborhood, media consumption), its manifestations in changing cultural values, norms, behaviors, and identities, and the complexity of its relationships

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: tanyan@ucr.edu (T. Nieri).

with health and social outcomes. Therefore, it is worthwhile to refocus research attention on acculturation itself and redress the methodological shortcomings of prior research. This study aims to contribute to that goal by examining acculturation in its very early stages, in a sample of Mexican-heritage preadolescents, using latent class analysis.

While much research on acculturation focuses on adolescents, relatively few studies focus on preadolescents (Coll and Kerivan Marks, 2009). Adolescence is the developmental stage during which key identity tasks are performed (Erikson, 1968). Yet, "identity work" may begin prior to this stage (Thorne, 2005). For example, elementary school children often grapple with the racial and ethnic identities that teachers assign to them (Lewis, 2003). Certain life events, such as migration, may precipitate earlier consideration of identity than would be the case otherwise. Immigrant children, for example, are often faced with identity questions and challenges due to being the foreigner among native children. Parents and children may wrestle over cultural differences arising out of the migration process (Chun and Akutsu, 2003). These conflicts not only can lead to broader parent-adolescent conflict (Szapocznik and Kurtines, 1993) but also have implications for the child's emerging identity (Chun and Akutsu, 2003).

As a developmental stage in itself, preadolescence typically involves children's first sustained exposure to influences outside the family, including the broader culture. While the identities that emerge in this stage may not be stable, they may be consequential as starting points (Weigers and Sherraden, 2001). Studies of adolescent risk have demonstrated that risk trajectories begin prior to adolescence. For example, a surprisingly large number of children begin using alcohol as early as 5th grade (Donovan, 2007). Even when risk behaviors are not initiated until later, precursors of risk behavior, such as social norms (Elek et al., 2006), may be established in preadolescence. Furthermore, research has explored the intersection of identity and educational achievement (Birr Moje and Martinez, 2007). Latino youths are known for their high dropout rates (López and Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and Mexican-heritage youths, in particular, have high rates of mobility during the school years (Ream, 2005). Thus, early acculturation likely has implications for later academic outcomes. For these reasons, it is worthwhile to explore acculturation among preadolescents.

We focus on the Mexican-heritage population because they comprise the largest group among immigrants (Ramirez and de la Cruz, 2003) and among Latinos, which is the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). This population is diverse in terms of language fluency, legal status, time in the United States, generation status, and race/phenotype (García, 2002; López and Stanton-Salazar, 2001). In addition to being numerous and diverse, this population faces many challenges, such as low educational attainment, disproportionate poverty, and discrimination (López and Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Thus, acculturation and its consequences are important issues for this group.

The next section reviews prior research on acculturation.

2. Background

2.1. Research on acculturation

The prevailing conceptual approach to acculturation in psychology is Berry's (1997) typology in which an individual is oriented along two linear dimensions – the origin culture and the new or host culture – and falls into one of four quadrants once the dimensions are cross tabulated: assimilated, integrated, separated, and marginalized. In the US context, these types translate to being highly acculturated to mainstream American culture, bicultural, highly attached solely to their origin culture, or unattached to either culture, respectively.

Empirical research has generated support for Berry's bi-dimensional conceptualization of acculturation, showing that individuals can, though they may not, retain their culture while acquiring a new culture (Berry, 2003) and that the effect on a youth of retaining his or her origin culture may be different than the effect of acquiring a new culture (Coatsworth et al., 2005; Birman, 1998). In methodological terms, the evidence suggests that acculturation is a categorical rather than a linear construct, though its dimensions may be linear.

While there is significant support for the bidimensionality of acculturation, there is mixed support for Berry's four acculturation types, depending on the sample which varies by developmental period: adolescence, emerging adulthood, and adulthood. While some research has identified these four types (Berry et al., 1989), other research has not. Coatsworth and colleagues (2005), for example, found in their sample of immigrant Latino youths that there were five rather than four acculturation identities. A better fit to the data existed when the integrated group was separated into strong biculturals – those highly attached to both mainstream and origin culture – and moderate biculturals – those with positive but less intense attachments to their dual cultures. Stevens and colleagues (2004) identified three acculturation types in a sample of Moroccan adult and adolescent immigrants in Europe, including a high bicultural type and a moderate bicultural type. Schwartz and Zamboanga (2008) found six acculturation types in their study of Latino college students, including two types of biculturalism and one type not clearly associated with any of Berry's types. These studies illustrate that a rigid categorical approach to measuring acculturation – one that assumes four and only four types are possible – may not be appropriate. Instead, a more flexible approach – one that does not limit the number of possible acculturation types and that captures the diversity emerging from the combinations of acculturation's two linear dimensions – is warranted.

It is noteworthy that the evidence of other than four types is related to the existence of the integrated or bicultural category. In the acculturation literature there is a prevailing belief that biculturalism is desirable (Trimble, 2003) because it either is associated with positive youth development (LaFromboise et al., 1993) or moderates the risk of negative outcomes