



ResearchLink

Living in Two Cultures: Implications for Latino Adolescent Health

Three studies reveal the impact of bicultural stress on Latino youth in the United States. Both immigrant and U.S.-born Latino youth face pressure to adopt the majority culture and preserve their culture of origin. They must cope with unfair treatment, cultural differences in their families, and pressure to become bilingual. The more they perceive these pressures as stressful, the more likely they are to suffer from depression and engage in risky behavior.

Why Latino Youth Report More Mental and Physical Health Problems

Latinos are the largest ethnic minority in the United States. They make up an even larger portion of younger populations. Yet compared to other groups, Latino adolescents report more mental and physical health problems. Research shows that Latino youth are more likely than Black or non-Latino White youth to have made a suicide plan or attempted suicide. These young people also report engaging in more risky behaviors such as illegal alcohol and drug use over their lifetime. Researchers want to understand what factors increase

the risk behaviors in order to address these factors in prevention programs for Latino youth.

One area that is not well understood is the relation between stress, coping, and Latino adolescent health. Stress from racism has been linked to depression in other ethnic minority groups. This finding has led researchers to examine stress that Latino youth may experience from living in a bicultural environment.

Bicultural stress is everyday stress that may result from pressure both to adopt the majority culture's values and to preserve one's original culture. For Latino youth who can draw on resources from both communities, living in two cultures can be a benefit. But for some adolescents, having to constantly switch between cultures may be hard. For example, Latino youth may feel pressure at school to adopt U.S. values; at the same time, their Latino peers may pressure them to keep up their Latino identity. In the family, adolescents may experience conflict with older relatives, who are adapting more slowly to the U.S. culture. When different languages are spoken at home and school, youth may be required to speak both English and Spanish fluently.



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According to theories of stress and coping, individuals perceive the level of stress in a situation differently. For example, having certain skills may actually reduce the effect of stress on adolescents' health. Bilingual youth may find it easier to live in bicultural environments than youth who speak only one language. But adolescents who perceive they cannot manage the demands of both cultures may report higher levels of stress. This stress may then be harmful to their mental and physical health.



Acculturation vs. Bicultural Stress Models

The *acculturation stress model* is a push model that moves in one direction.

ethnic culture → new culture

It focuses mostly on the pressures faced by immigrant groups, particularly adults, to adapt to the majority culture. Stressors include:

- parenting, marriage, and work stress
- prejudice
- discrimination
- status as a minority in the new culture
- pressure to learn English

The *bicultural stress model* is a push-pull model, recognizing that ethnic minorities regularly move between their own community and the majority culture.

ethnic culture ↔ new culture

It focuses on the stress that comes from trying to manage the demands of both cultures. Stressors include:

- conflict and gaps between generations in the family
- the need to learn many languages
- peer pressure to preserve their culture of origin

About the Studies

Dr. Andrea Romero and fellow researchers wanted to understand how bicultural stress affects Latino youth's health. First, they expanded the acculturation model to include adolescents' experience of bicultural stress. Then they developed a scale to determine the relation between bicultural stress and adolescent health outcomes. They later used this scale to measure bicultural stress in three different studies.

Measuring Bicultural Stress

In the first study, a 20-item survey was given to 881 rural middle-school students of Mexican origin. The students were either immigrants or U.S.-born. They reported on stressful events they experienced and how stressful those events were. They also answered questions about what languages they spoke, socioeconomic status (SES), self-esteem, and depression. The goals of the study were:

1. To test the reliability of a new bicultural stress scale
2. To look at differences between immigrant and U.S.-born Latino youth in the type and level of stress they experienced
3. To understand how bicultural stress and depression are related, after taking into account the influence of self-esteem

Findings:

The scale is a reliable measure of perceived bicultural stress. Among the youth in this study, immigrant students reported facing many more stressors than U.S.-born students. The two groups also differed in the types of stressors that were hard to manage. U.S.-born students perceived more stress from needing better Spanish; they also felt that their parents' culture kept them from being like other American kids. Immigrant students perceived more stress from problems at school because of poor English.

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For both groups, the most frequently reported stress came from family commitments or insulting ethnic jokes. They also perceived more bicultural stress if they spoke less English, were older in age, and had lower SES, more depression, and lower self-esteem.



How Did Researchers Develop the Bicultural Stress Scale?

Two researchers developed a reliable way to assess the effect of bicultural stress on Latino youth.

- First, they created a list of items based on a widely used instrument to measure adult stress. They looked over previous research about stress in adolescents' everyday bicultural environments. Then they added more items to the list. They put their 20-item list into a survey format.
- Second, they asked seven individuals aged 18-21 years to complete the survey. Afterwards, these youth discussed together with the researchers the meaning of each item. From their responses, the researchers made several changes to the list.
- Third, they asked 43 middle school students to determine how easy the survey was to read. Based on these results, more items were changed.
- Finally, they asked 881 Mexican origin adolescents to fill out the survey. The adolescents' responses to the survey were consistent with the earlier students' responses. In particular, the stress they reported from living in two cultures was related to depression.

“Clearly, we need to better understand youth strengths in the face of discrimination, prejudice, and acculturation at home and school,” says Dr. Andrea Romero, associate professor in the Mexican American Studies & Research Center at The University of Arizona and the lead author of all three studies.

Later Studies

Dr. Romero and colleagues have used the bicultural stress scale in two additional studies. They compared minority and non-Latino White youth's experience of stress from living in two cultures. The first study included 304 Latino, 215 non-Latino White, and 131 Asian American 8th-grade students. Minority youth reported many more bicultural stressors with much greater frequency than non-Latino White youth. Youth who reported more bicultural stress had more depression and less optimism (for girls only). Relative to Latinos or non-Latino Whites, Asian Americans differed in three other ways. They more frequently reported greater family stress, more discomfort with other cultures, and more intense stress due to ethnic jokes.

The second study compared 304 Latino and 215 non-Latino White students on bicultural stress, depression, and risk behaviors. Latino students reported much higher levels of bicultural stress than non-Latino White students. Youth who reported more bicultural stress also reported higher levels of all risk behaviors (smoking, drinking, drug use, and violence) and depression.

Implications

- Bicultural stress is experienced by Latino youth, as well as by non-Latino White and Asian American adolescents. This type of stress can be experienced differently by ethnic group and gender. Mental health researchers and service providers must consider the many cultural contexts of stress for adolescents of all ethnic backgrounds. They need to be aware of these differences when caring for adolescents who suffer from poor health outcomes.
- Future research needs to improve our understanding of the benefits of living in a bicultural context. Some research shows the importance for Latino youth of developing a positive ethnic identity and active coping strategies. These strengths can provide insight into how Latino youth can better cope with perceived bicultural stress.
- Professionals who work in youth development programs should consider the implications of bicultural contexts for how they design their program activities.

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This ResearchLink summarizes three reports:

- (1) Romero, A. J., & Roberts, R. E. (2003). Stress within a bicultural context for adolescents of Mexican descent. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 9, 171-184.
- (2) Romero, A. J., Carvajal, S. C., Valle, F., & Oduña, M. (2007). Adolescent bicultural stress and its impact on mental well-being among Latinos, Asian Americans, and European Americans. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35, 519-534.
- (3) Romero, A. J., Martinez, D., & Carvajal, S. C. (2007). Bicultural stress and adolescent risk behaviors in a community sample of Latinos and non-Latino European Americans. *Ethnicity & Health*, 12, 443-463.

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