Effects of Acculturation and Generational Status on Ethnocultural and Psychosocial Adaptation of Mexican-American Adolescents

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The extent to which acculturation and generational status affect the ethnocultural and psychosocial adaptation of Mexican-American adolescents was investigated. Participants were classified into acculturation and generational status levels from scores on the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans-Revised (ARSMAR-II) and the dependent variable was measured using the Psychosocial Adaptation for Cultural and Contextual Correspondence-Research Version (PACCC-RV). Mexican-American adolescents with lower acculturation levels and more recent residence in the United States perceived they were ethnoculturally different from others in their environment especially in regards to communication difficulties. Similar to previous studies, acculturation and generational status appear to be measuring similar dimensions.

According to Cole (1991), culture can be viewed as an individual’s medium of adaptation to the demands of the environment where an individual must simultaneously incorporate information based on what is occurring in their immediate context as well as those environments that surround it. As such, environments may call upon the individual to possess certain cultural characteristics that will enhance healthy psychological functioning (Swartz & Martin, 1997; Swartz & Martin, 1999; Martin & Swartz, 1999). For example, an adolescent must exhibit certain psychosocial behaviors that are contextually and culturally appropriate to feel in correspondence with his or her environment. Equally as
important, the adolescent must feel that people in the environment accept his or her ethnocultural orientation and present opportunities for him or her to experience congruence or “fit.” Achieving this congruence can be more complicated when an adolescent possesses an ethnocultural background that is uniquely different from the prevailing culture of the environment.

Aside from the normal developmental demands placed on a child, minority children need to learn that they can participate in two different cultural settings, each with different cultural norms, without losing their own cultural identity, or abdicating loyalty to the minority community (Ogbu, 1992). However, settlement in a new cultural and social setting places extraordinary psychosocial demands on an individual that significantly affect development (Laosa, 1990). For example, Kim and Choi (1994) discuss the rift that may occur between family values taught at home and those emphasized in the social institutions of the new culture. The result is that children and adolescents become the victims of incompatible demands that may lead to manifestation of symptoms of maladjustment (Kim & Choi, 1994) and greater dependence on the peer group for support (Rodriguez & Zayas, 1990). Additionally, serious cultural conflicts arising from different value systems at home and within the dominant society can lead to cognitive dissonance and difficulty in developing a coherent identity (Camilleri & Malewska-Peyre, 1997).

For Hispanic children previous research has shown that awareness of ethnicity begins to surface by the age of nine or ten years (Oligaki, Frensch & Dodson, 1996), indicating that this process is well under way by adolescence. During this time, two primary conflicts need to be addressed by the individual (Phinney, Lochner & Murphy, 1990). The first is that of ignorance, stereotypes and prejudices expressed by those in the dominant culture that lead one to question one’s value in relation to the larger society. The second is the existence of two conflicting sets of norms and values between the larger society and the culture of origin. An individual’s response to these conflicts can vary from active exploration and resolution (leading to achieved ethnic identity) to refusal and failure to deal with them directly (leading to failed sense of ethnic identity). In turn, the range of psychological and behavioral responses can range from refusal to participate in either culture (marginalization), to being able to participate in both cultures equally (bicultural).

Two important factors affecting ethnic identity and ethnocultural conflict are generational status and acculturation that in turn, have shown a linear relationship with each other. Generally speaking, acculturation is the lowest for the first generation, and increases with later generations (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995a; Cuellar, Arnold, & Gonzalez, 1995b; Moyerman & Forman, 1992; Sodowski et al., 1991). Sodowski et al. (1992) also suggest that generational status is linked to modes of acculturation (i.e., marginalization, assimilation, integration) to the extent that first generation immigrants are more likely to reject the host culture, while second, third and fourth generations are more likely to integrate to varying degrees, aspects of the host culture.

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which acculturation level and generational status affected how well 7th and 8th grade Mexican American adolescents perceived they were adapting, psychosocially and ethnoculturally, to their environment.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 231 Mexican-American and White Junior High School students whose ages ranged from twelve to fourteen years, the mean being 12.73 (SD = .59). Of these students, 53.2% were female, 46.8% were males. Regarding ethnicity, one-hundred seventy-three (74.9%) were Mexican-American, fifty-eight (25.1%) were non-Hispanic White.

The average size of students’ families was 6 (SD = 2.25). Of these, 40% were single income families. Seventy-six percent (n = 176) of the participants reported the education levels attained by their parents. One hundred and twenty one (69%) had high school education, 27 (15%) had some college, and 28 (16%) were college graduates.

In regards to economic conditions of the district, school officials reported that the area from which this sample
was drawn is relatively economically disadvantaged, as
evidenced by high numbers of students in each school
receiving reduced or free school lunches. However,
tries to more accurately understand the
socioeconomic status of the sample were difficult at best,
given that we were not permitted to inquire as to whether
or not students received free or reduced lunches, or to
include a question regarding parent’s income levels on
the Parent Permission slip.

Equivalence of Subgroups

In order to examine any effects that demographic
variables, other than the independent variables, might
have had on the analyses, ANOVA analyses or Chi-square
tests for independence were performed on the
demographic variables of age groups, family size groups,
gender, and parent’s education levels by the independent
grouping variables of generational status and
acculturation levels. No significant differences were
found among any of the acculturation or generational
status sub-groups and their performance on the
dependent variables for any of the demographic
variables. As such, it was determined that these
demographic variables did not differentially affect the
dependent variables.

Instrumentation

The Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans-
Revised (ARSMA-II) is the first instrument discussed
which was used in the study to specify levels of the
independent variables, acculturation and generational
status. The second psychometric instrument discussed is
the Psychosocial Adaptation for Cultural and Contextual
Correspondence-Research Version (P ACCC-RV) which was
used to measure the dependent variable, psychosocial
and ethnocultural adaptation.

ARSMA-II is a 30 item questionnaire that provided
information to establish levels for the independent
variables of generational status and acculturation (Cuellar
et al., 1995b). Items are worded to address primarily
behavioral aspects of acculturation and are presented in
English and Spanish on the same page. Responses are
given on a five-point Likert-type scale. The questionnaire
contains two orthogonal subscales that measure
orientation toward Mexican culture (MOS) and Anglo
culture (AOS). By subtracting the mean MOS score from
the mean AOS score, a linear acculturation score is
produced which represents the respondent’s level of
acculturation along a continuum from Very Mexican to
Very Anglo oriented. The authors provide a table with
suggested cutting scores to classify the Mexican-
American respondents into one of five possible levels:
Very Mexican, Mexican Oriented to approximately
balance bicultural, Slightly Anglo oriented bicultural,
Strongly Anglo Oriented and Very assimilated. Responses
to the ARSMA - II also provided information to classify
the Mexican-American respondents into the generational
levels, 1st generation, 2nd generation, and 3rd (and
higher) generation.

The norming sample for the ARSMA-II consisted of 379
university students representing five generation levels of
Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and White non-Hispanics
living in south Texas. Strong evidence for construct and
concurred validity and internal consistency have been
reported for the whole instrument, as well as for the two
subscales (Cuellar et al., 1995a). Internal consistency for
the MOS produced a coefficient alpha of .88, while the
AOS yielded an alpha of .83. Additionally, scores
obtained on the ARSMA-II have been highly correlated
with the original ARSMA (r = .89; N = 171). While this
data was obtained via a young adult sample, the ARSMA-
II was still deemed an appropriate instrument for use
with adolescents. Several factors were carefully
considered in this regard. First, a panel of experts was
consulted, including the author of the ARSMA-II, who
agreed on the face validity of this instrument for this
particular population. Second, consultation with
classroom teachers resulted in agreement as to the
reading level appropriateness. Third, the fact that it was
written in both English and Spanish was highly desirable,
and lastly, there were simply no other instruments
available that specifically measured acculturation for
Mexican-American individuals that were also normed on
adolescents.

The PACCC-RV is a shortened version of the PACCC
(Swartz, 1996) comprised of 40 items that measure the
extent to which an individual perceives that cultural and
contextual factors are affecting his or her ability to adapt
successfully to his or her environment. Items for the
PACCC and PACCC-RV were developed using a five
factor theoretical model comprised of cultural orientation,
family environment, community environment,
communication, and language. Cultural orientation
encompasses acculturation, beliefs, values, norms,
traditions, ceremonies, coping style, and cognitive style.
Family environment includes family structure, family
relations, and involvement in the culture of origin. The
community environment is defined by community
structure, support networks, rules for social conduct, and
movement of residence. Communication relates to
communication mode, interpersonal relations, expression
of emotions, and response style. Language refers to the
accuracy, fluency, style, and preference for
communication through spoken and written language.

A series of exploratory factor analyses were performed on
several data sets (Fairfield, 1998; Stolle, 1998; Swartz,
1996; Martin, Swartz, & Madson, 1999) resulting in a three
factor structure. The three factors were designated as
entered into the statistical analysis unchanged.

Reliability

A measure of internal consistency for this sample’s performance on the PACCC-RV was undertaken as well. Cronbach’s alpha for the total PACCC-RV score was .89. Measures of internal consistency for each of the scales were as follows: (a) Cultural Orientation, .82, (b) Contextual satisfaction, .76, and (c) contextual satisfactoriness, .64.

Correlation of the Independent Variables

A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was calculated on the total acculturation and generational status scores resulting in r (231) = .85, p = .000.

Results

One-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) and accompanying univariate ANOVA analyses were used to analyze scores obtained on the three dependent variables, cultural orientation, contextual satisfaction and contextual satisfactoriness for each independent variable (acculturation and generational status). Tukey’s Honestly Significant Differences (HSD) statistic was used for ANOVA post hoc analyses to compare paired mean differences. Finally, univariate ANOVA’s with post hoc Least Significant Differences (LSD) analyses of the PACCC-RV’s five factor model were conducted to obtain a further understanding of the dimensions associated with significant differences in dependent variables.

Acculturation

It was hypothesized that adolescents’ average scores on the PACCC-RV would be higher (more perceived difficulty adapting psychosocially and ethnoculturally to the environment) and significantly different across acculturation level groupings as follows: low acculturation > medium acculturation > high acculturation > non-Hispanic White.

Results of the MANOVA indicated a significant Wilks’ Lambda = .838, F (9) = 4.59, p = .0001 on the overall main effect of the acculturation variable. The means and standard deviations of the PACCC-RV sub-scales scores for each level of acculturation are presented in Table 1. Higher scores reflect more perceived difficulties in psychosocial adaptation. Subsequent univariate ANOVA analyses were conducted to determine which of the dependent variables was significantly different based on acculturation levels. Cultural orientation (perceived...
ethnocultural similarities or differences from others in the environment) was the only dependent variable that was significant (F (3, 227) = 11.18, p = .0001) of the three analyzed together. The effect size was eta square = .13. The post hoc Tukey’s HSD test revealed the following paired mean differences (p < .05): (a) the average cultural orientation score for the low and medium acculturated Mexican-American adolescents was significantly higher (more perceived ethnocultural differences than others in their environment) than the mean for the White adolescents (effect sizes respectively, .98 and .65) and (b) the average cultural orientation score for the low acculturated Mexican-American adolescents was significantly higher than the mean of the high acculturated Mexican-American adolescents (effect size = .53).

A further analysis was undertaken to ascertain which of the five theoretical factors of the PACCC-RV related to cultural orientation were being most affected by acculturation. One significant difference was found among the acculturation level groups on communication, F (3, 225) = 5.50, p = .0012. A post hoc analysis using Fisher’s Least Significant Difference (LSD) showed that the low acculturated Mexican-American adolescents had higher scores (more perceived difficulties in communication) than the medium acculturated Mexican-American adolescents, high acculturated Mexican-American adolescents, and the White adolescents.

**Generational Status**

It was hypothesized that adolescents average scores on the PACCC-RV would be higher (more perceived difficulty adapting psychosocially and ethnoculturally to the environment) and significantly different across generational status level grouping as follows: first generation > second generation > third generation > non-Hispanic White.

Results from the MANOVA revealed a significant main effect Wilks’ Lambda = .815, F (9) = 5.34, p = .0001 indicating a greater difference in mean scores obtained on dependent measures than one would expect by chance. The means and standard deviations of the PACCC-RV sub-scales scores for each level of generation status are presented in Table 2. Separate univariate ANOVA’s were conducted on each dependent variable in order to determine where the significant differences were. The univariate ANOVA analyses, again, revealed that the cultural orientation variable (F (3, 27) = 12.13, p = .0001) was the only significant dependent variable of the three analyzed together. The overall main effect size eta square = .14. The post hoc Tukey’s HSD (p < .05) resulted in the following mean differences between the subgroups: (a) First and second generation Mexican-American adolescents scored significantly higher (more perceived
ethnocultural differences than others in their environment) than White adolescents (effect sizes respectively, .96 and .81); and (b) First and second generation Mexican-American adolescents scored significantly higher than third generation Mexican-American adolescents (effect sizes respectively, .57 and .45).

A further analysis was undertaken to ascertain which of the five theoretical factors of the PACCC-RV related to cultural orientation were being most affected by generational status. One significant difference was found among the generational status groups on communication, F (3, 225) = 4.88, p = .0026. A post hoc analysis using Fisher’s Least Significant Difference (LSD) showed that the first and second generation Mexican-American adolescents scored significantly higher (more perceived difficulties in communication) than the White adolescents.

**Discussion**

There was substantial but not complete support for the first hypothesis. Acculturation did show a significant main effect on the dependent variables of cultural orientation, contextual satisfaction, and contextual satisfactoriness. For the most part, a visual inspection of the means by acculturation levels shows that the size of the means reflect the hypothesized directions of higher scores (more perceived difficulty adapting psychosocially and ethnoculturally) for adolescents with lower acculturation levels. However, the dependent variable that showed significant differences across the acculturation levels was cultural orientation. Post hoc analyses showed that low and medium acculturated Mexican-American adolescents perceived that they were more ethnoculturally different than others in their environment when compared to non-Hispanic White adolescents. Furthermore, the same differences were found comparing low acculturated Mexican-American adolescents to high acculturated Mexican-American adolescents.

In sum, the Mexican-American adolescents in this study who were less acculturated and more recent residents of the United States perceived that they were more ethnoculturally different from people in their environment compared to Mexican-American and non-Hispanic White adolescents. Furthermore, the adolescents felt they communicated differently from people around them, they related better to people from their own ethnic and cultural group, and experienced greater difficulty in demonstrating their feelings. It must be pointed out that while there were consistent differences between Mexican-American adolescents and non-Hispanic White adolescents, there also were differences across acculturation and generation status levels within the Mexican-American adolescent group.

It may be that these perceptions of ethnocultural differences, especially related to communication, affected how well these adolescents believed they “fit” into their environment. While the factor that most directly measures “fit”, contextual satisfactoriness, reflected means in the expected directions, they were not statistically significant. As such, caution is required about concluding that these adolescent perceptions of being ethnoculturally different from people in their environment lead to feelings of not “fitting.”
Similar to previous findings (Cuellar et al., 1995a; Cuellar et al., 1995b; Moyerman & Forman, 1992; Sodowki et al., 1991), a strong positive relationship (r = .85) was found between acculturation and generational status, as well as, significant effects of these variables on psychosocial and cultural adaptation. The effects of both variables are nearly interchangeable. As such, the findings in this study with Mexican-American adolescents (12-14 years old) adds to past research that shows that acculturation and generational status are measuring similar dimensions.

Implications

The question of how adolescents perceive themselves culturally in relation to their context is one that seems to have direct impact on how mental health agencies and schools are able to meet the needs of a culturally diverse society. In the past, broad generalizations about the psychosocial needs of diverse individuals were made on the basis of group membership—often to the exclusion of variables that make an individual unique within the group. Trimble (1991) coined the term “ethnic gloss” to explain this phenomenon, one that ultimately leads to relational approaches based on stereotypes and assumptions. In response, attention has been focused on variables such as acculturation and generational status, to name a few, that enhance understanding of the differences that exist within different ethnic groups. From a psychosocial perspective, acculturation is generally considered to be a behavioral and attitudinal change (Marin, 1992) caused by contact with another culture; however, little attention is given to how one perceives oneself in relation to another culture. The results of this study suggest that Mexican-American adolescents perceive themselves as being different primarily along the lines of how they communicate with others in their environment. Questions about how well they “fit” into their particular context are not causing psychosocial disturbance, although they might certainly be a factor.

With this in mind, it seems important that professionals (counselors, teachers, clergy) working with Mexican-American children explore the extent to which a student perceives their ability to communicate is impacting his/her adaptation to a new context. This information could then be used to generate activities that specifically target identified areas of difficulty. Examples of some activities might include; a language training program that addresses day to day procedural and conversational dialogue in order to help individuals feel more confident in their abilities to cope with a new environment, a cultural orientation program or workshop that would include lessons on acculturation and the feelings normally associated with cultural transitions. This workshop might also include activities that allow an individual to realistically assess their expectations of their new environment, and provide problemsolving strategies for a specific environment. Finally, another activity might include counseling to maintain a positive self-image, or to process interpersonal struggles related to their own cultural orientation. These activities, as well as many others could be informed by knowledge of a person’s perceptions of themselves in relation to their environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that Mexican-American adolescents who were less acculturated and/or more recent residents of this country demonstrated a heightened awareness of their differences in relation to their environment. This included perceived discrepancies between the adolescent and their environment, especially in regards to communication modes, interpersonal relations, expression of emotions, and response style. Perceiving oneself as ethnoculturally different in an environment is very likely associated with feelings of not being psychosocially congruent but we cannot make that conclusion definitively from our results. Future research should focus on determining the extent to which perceptions of being ethnoculturally different causes feelings of being incongruent within an environment. Furthermore, the extent to which communication difficulties may be a leading contributor to these perceptions of ethnocultural differences needs further investigation.

References


