LIFE EXPERIENCES OF HISPANIC ADOLESCENTS: DEVELOPMENTAL AND LANGUAGE CONSIDERATIONS IN ACCULTURATION STRESS

Richard C. Cervantes
Behavioral Assessment, Inc.

David Cordova
University of Miami Miller School of Medicine

Hispanic youth currently constitute the largest and fastest growing of all ethnic and racial groups in the United States. In addition to normal developmental life stressors, Hispanic youth also face minority status and acculturation-related stress. This study examined the psychosocial and acculturative stressors of Hispanic youth (n = 170) residing in the northeast and southwest United States through the use of focus group methodology. Findings are presented within a developmental perspective and suggest that Hispanic youth experience stressors broadly categorized across 6 domains, namely: (a) immigration, (b) communication and language, (c) school and academic, (d) peer, (e) family, and (f) social and economic. © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Recent epidemiological studies suggest that the majority of nonimmigrant Hispanic adult populations report higher rates of mental health problems, relative to their immigrant counterparts (Alegría, Canino, et al., 2008; Alegría, Mulvaney-Day et al., 2007). Furthermore, studies also suggest that when stratified by country of origin, certain Hispanic adult subpopulations report higher prevalence rates of mental health and psychiatric disorders (i.e., Puerto Ricans; Alegría, Canino, et al., 2008; Alegría,

Correspondence to: Dr. David Cordova, 1425 N.W. 10th Ave., Miami, FL 33136.
E-mail: dcordova@med.miami.edu

Mulvaney-Day et al., 2007; Rogler, 1994; Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991). In spite of these findings, relatively little is known with regard to our understanding of stressors experienced by Hispanic adolescents, which could serve as precursors to mental health problems. Only recently have investigators begun to understand the importance of developmental and immigration status factors related to Hispanic student perceptions of stressors (e.g., discrimination; Cordova & Cervantes, 2010). Furthermore, a dearth of research exists aimed at better understanding whether, and the extent to which, stressors vary among Spanish versus English speakers, younger versus older adolescents (middle school vs. high school aged), and how these stressors serve as barriers to promote healthy development in Hispanic youth. More knowledge about these factors could have high utility in informing preventive interventions aimed to reduce and prevent mental illness among Hispanic youth populations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Social Stress and Minority Status

Research has demonstrated that exposure to stressful life events has adverse effects on both the psychological and the physical well-being of individuals and families (Sparrenberger, Fuchs, Moreira, & Fuchs, 2008). Social Stress theory postulates that social organization plays a significant role in the origins and consequences of stressful life experiences (Aneshensel, 1992). In addition, social stress theory affirms that disenfranchised populations might experience increased stress because of the inequalities found in the social organization in which the individual or family is embedded (Aneshensel). This is particularly relevant for ethnic minority groups, including Hispanics, because of the significant health disparities (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2009; Szapocznik, Prado, Burlew, Williams, & Santisteban, 2007) and structural exclusion (Blendon et al., 2008; Snowden, 2005) experienced by this segment of the population. Stressful life experiences can cause negative emotional and biological reactions that impact mental and physical health (Cohen, Kessler, & Underwood, 1995). Scholars contend that racial/ethnic discrimination is a critical life event and a major source of stress in the environment for ethnic minorities in the United States due to their minority status (Allison, 1998; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000). Clark and colleagues have suggested that perceptions of racial/ethnic discrimination function similarly to other social stressors, such that perceived discrimination can induce physiological and psychological arousal and lead to negative emotional states and health-compromising behaviors. In national surveys, racial/ethnic discrimination has been reported as a major social stressor for Latinos (American Psychological Association, 2006; National Survey of Latinos, 2002). For example, racial/ethnic discrimination has been linked to poorer physical health, psychological distress, and depression (Finch, Hummer, Kolody, & Vega, 2001; Flores et al., 2008). Thus, there is growing evidence that perceived racial/ethnic discrimination influences psychological and behavioral outcomes through the mechanism of stress reactions (Carter, 2007; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003).

Hispanic and other minority adolescents in the United States share many stressors related to minority status (Colten & Gore, 1991; Rice & Dolgin, 2002). In addition to normative stress that most adolescents face (e.g., school, individuation), they also

confront additional stressors related to minority status such as discrimination, increased poverty rates, cultural and language barriers, and immigration challenges (Cordova & Cervantes, 2010; Rice & Dolgin; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Acculturation and Acculturation Stress

Historically, acculturation has been defined as multidimensional process of socialization that usually involves dominant and nondominant cultures (Berry, 2001). Individuals from nondominant cultures experience a wide range of stress events tied to processes of marginalization, separation, assimilation, integration, and biculturalism (see Agar, 1991).

More recently, however, acculturation definitions have been criticized. Rudmin (2009) argues that research on acculturation has led to negative stereotypes about minorities. He suggests that a reorientation of research towards understanding cultural learning and cultural acquisition would more appropriate. Rudmin (2009) also argues that measures of acculturative stress often confused stressor events with the negative outcomes of these events, and that the construct of acculturation is often confounded with acculturative stress. The current research suggests that acculturation changes, including stressor events, constitute acculturation stress that affects the Hispanic population, and it is hypothesized that acculturation changes are an important antecedent for mental health problems in both adults and children (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Rogler et al., 1991; Vega & Gil, 1998). Individuals and families from one cultural orientation constantly being exposed to new, novel, and challenging events and situations require some form of psychological and behavioral adjustments. Some contextual stressors have been related to the social environment and, specifically, for example, the exposure to racial/ethnic discrimination (negative behaviors toward Latino youth) constitutes a source of daily stress (Romero & Roberts, 2003). This type of stressful event is primary based on one's minority status membership. Further, stressors associated with discrimination exposure have been found to be traumatizing and related to the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Flores et al., 2008).

Research evaluating the effects of acculturation on the adjustment of adolescents has shown mixed results and is not well understood (Lara, Gamboa, Kahramanian, Morales, & Bautista, 2005). Some studies have found a positive effect on mental health in more acculturated Hispanics (Gonzales, Haan, & Hinton, 2001). In contrast, other studies on acculturation and associated psychological, emotional, and behavioral change have been found to have a negative effect on a number of health outcomes for Hispanic youth, such as substance abuse (Vega & Gil, 1998), teenage pregnancy (Coonrod, Day, & Balcazar, 2004), and mental health problems (Hovey, 2000).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Within the context of the social stress and stressful life events research (Aneshensel, 1992; Cervantes et al., 1991), this study aimed to identify acculturation stressors in a representative sample of adolescents through focus groups methodology. We expected to find differences in the types of acculturation stressors found in middle school versus high school groups of adolescents, and Spanish-speaking versus English-speaking. We believed that youth development might mediate the experience of stressful events. For example, Rice and Dolgin (2002) described various ages and stages of psychosocial development between earlier adolescents who are preoccupied primarily with establishing relationships with same-sex youth, while older adolescents became interested in

intimate-partner relationships. Additionally, cultural differences in psychosocial development have been discussed, in which Hispanic adolescents gravitate toward stronger family ties that endure into late adolescent years as opposed to youth in the mainstream culture (Niemann, Romero, Arredondo, & Rodriguez, 1999). We also expected that Spanish-speaking, lower acculturated youth would be affected differently as well. Cordova and Cervantes (2010), for example found language and communication stressors to be more pronounced than for English-speaking, nonimmigrant youth. We argue that stressors related to minority status are one form of acculturation stress. Other acculturation stressors have been identified in previous adult studies and include immigration stress, parental stress, occupational stress, marital stress, and family based culture conflicts (Cervantes et al., 1991). This conceptualization of acculturation stress and component stressor domain served as the theoretical framework for this study. The current study represents Phase I of a larger quantitative study of stressful life events.

METHODS

Design

An expert panel of Hispanic clinical researchers was interviewed to determine current perspective on Hispanic adolescent stress, particularly related to minority status and acculturation. Based on the expert panel's input about acculturation stress theory, an interview guide was developed and comprised six grand tour areas of inquiry and potential probes. In addition, the work of the primary author and colleagues guided the framework for the study design and use of the a priori stress domain definitions (Cervantes et al., 1991; Cervantes & Castro, 1985; Padilla, Wagatsuma, & Lindholm, 1985). The six grand tour areas (domains) of inquiry included the following: (a) immigration stress, (b) communication and language stress, (c) school and academic stress, (d) peer stress, (e) family stress, and (f) social and economic stress.

Focus groups have been shown to be a powerful investigative tool to facilitate collection of rich data, particularly for disenfranchised populations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). For example, given the low literacy and high school completion rates in the Hispanic population, focus groups facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that might not otherwise be obtained through measures and surveys that might require higher literacy capabilities (Morgan, 1997; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

All focus group facilitators who conducted the interviews were bilingual and of Hispanic origin, as suggested by Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004). Second, the focus groups comprised same-gender and mixed-gender participants. The use of same-gender groups has been found to control for male dominance in mixed groups (Stewart et al., 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca). Participants were given a choice to participate in either a Spanish-language or an English-language focus group interview. Because focus group interviews were conducted in a reserved room during school hours, participants from middle school and high school participated separately in their developmental age groups. That is, middle school-aged youth did not participate in high school focus group interviews and vice versa.

Sampling and Recruitment

A total of $N = 170$ youth participants were interviewed in 25 separate focus groups. Participants were recruited from middle schools, high schools, and community-based

clinical programs in two research sites located in the northeast and southwest regions of the United States. A mixed stratified sampling strategy was designed to elicit information from middle school-aged and high school-aged youth, and English-speaking and Spanish-speaking adolescents. To be considered for this study, participants had to (a) identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino, (b) be between the ages of 11 to 19 years old, and (c) give assent and provide parental consent. The exclusion criterion included those individuals who were identified as having more severe forms of adolescent mental health disorders such as developmental disorders (autism, mental retardation) and/or childhood/adolescent psychosis. The sampling design comprised four strata.

Sample Characteristics

Approximately 42% of the focus group participants were recruited from middle school, 35% from high school, and 23% from clinics. The mean age of the sample was 14.8 years (standard deviation [SD] = 2.20), and more females (62%) than males (38%) participated in this study. The majority of the sample (52%) reported Mexico as their family's country of origin, followed by Guatemala (14%) and Puerto Rico (10%), respectively. The remainder of the sample's family country of origin included South America, and Central American and Caribbean countries including Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. Approximately half of the participants were foreign born (52%). Furthermore, 90% of the participants' mothers and 89% of the fathers were foreign born. Sixty percent of the participants reported Spanish as their primary language, followed by bilingual (26%) and English (14%). Similarly, 47% of the participants reported speaking Spanish at home, followed by speaking both Spanish and English (43%) and English only (10%). However, participants reported speaking English with friends (33%) more frequently than Spanish (24%), and speaking both languages (43%) was the most common practice. The father was currently employed for 68% of the sample and the mother for 54% of the sample. The majority of the participants reported that their grades in school were very or usually satisfactory (59%) and only 1% reported they are usually not satisfactory.

Focus Group Procedures

The principal and site coordinator introduced the researchers to the teacher and potential participants of each selected classroom and explained the purpose of the study 1 week before conducting the focus group interview. Researchers provided consent forms to students and all students returning signed consent forms were included in the focus groups held in a predesignated classroom. A sociodemographic questionnaire that included items to measure immigrant status ("Born in the U.S.?"), which was administered, and then either the primary author or trained research associates, who have extensive interviewing experience, moderated the focus groups. Focus groups were digitally recorded and an observer was present to take additional notes on the group process. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. An incentive of $200 was given to each teacher to use for special class activities.

Data Analysis

The audiotapes of the 25 focus groups were transcribed and analyzed by four members of the research team, including three doctoral-level researchers and one

trained research assistant. The data were analyzed using a directed content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). QSR International's XSight 2 was utilized for organization, analysis, and coding of the data.

The initial step in the coding process refers to utilizing the broad six domains identified by the expert panel as the initial coding categories. Thereafter, operational definitions for each category were determined based on the panel's feedback (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A next step in the analysis referred to reading and highlighting all text that appeared to acculturation stress. Next, all the highlighted passages were coded using the predetermined domains established by the expert panel. The final step in the analysis referred to establishing new codes for all those data that could not be coded in the initial coding scheme (Hsieh & Shannon).

Trustworthiness of Data

Trustworthiness of the data was established following the guidelines described by Morrow (2005), which comprised methods to ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility refers to ensuring rigor in the research process and can be achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation in the field, and use of peer researchers and researcher reflexivity (Morrow). For example, the first author spent a significant amount of time in the school in which data were collected. In addition, the first author discussed analysis and results with the expert panel to obtain feedback. Transferability refers to whether, and the extent to which, a reader can generalize these findings (Morrow). Transferability was achieved through describing the research context (i.e., school setting and community-based clinics in New Jersey and Los Angeles), participants (i.e., English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Hispanic adolescents, middle school and high school), and processes (e.g., participants recruited from classrooms, gathered in a reserved room, focus groups). Dependability refers to the process of a study that is explicit and repeatable (Morrow), and it was achieved through an audit trail, which provided a detailed description of the research activities and processes. In addition, the first author then shared this audit trail with both the expert panel and the co-author. Finally, confirmability refers to ensuring the integrity of the findings, and that the findings are representative of the data and not the researchers' biases (Morrow). To this end, the first and second author engaged in many conversations during the data analysis for researcher reflexivity activities to minimize subjectivity and a detailed audit trail was maintained (Morrow).

RESULTS

Data were categorized across six major domains related to acculturation stress experiences. Specifically, these domains reflected acculturative stress, including stressors associated with minority status: (a) communication and language stress, (b) family stress, (c) immigration stress, (d) peer stress, (e) school and academic stress, and (f) social and economic stress.

Communication and Language Stress

A common theme identified by the Hispanic youth was stress related to communication and language. For example, participants expressed stressors associated with the difficulties

of not knowing the English language, learning a new language, having to translate for family members with less English proficiency, and consequently feeling isolated.

Although similarities were found between middle school-aged and high school-aged adolescents with respect to acculturation and minority status stressors within the communication and language context, there were some notable differences, particularly as it related to Spanish-speaking and English-speaking participants. Specifically, Spanish-speaking participants of this study expressed feelings of hopelessness and insecurity, and indicated that speaking and understanding English was a difficult and stressful task. For example, one middle school-aged Spanish-speaking participant described the difficulties of not knowing the English language well: "Talking … sometimes you understand and sometimes you don't understand. Then you try to talk and you mess up." Another middle school-aged Spanish-speaking youth summed it up by saying, "It feels hopeless to not understand what is being said."

In contrast, both middle school-aged and high school-aged youth mentioned stressors related to having to translate for family members. In particular, English-speaking youth expressed having to translate for monolingual Spanish-speaking parents as a stressful task. One high school-aged English-speaking youth said, "I get frustrated to always translate for my parents." Another middle school-aged English-speaking youth remarked, "Talking is kind of hard. You are speaking two languages in one." Similarly, another middle school-aged English-speaking participant expressed: "When my mom has to make a phone call and she is with me, she makes me make the call. Talking on the phone, parents say, 'What are you saying? What are you saying?'"

Family Stress

Youth in this study consistently expressed stressors within the context of the family such as intergenerational cultural differences, family separations, and family substance use. In addition, all participants expressed stressors related to acculturation differences between youth and their parents, cultural values, and beliefs. Both middle school and high school participants expressed similar experiences of family-related stressors. There are differences that merit attention, however. Spanish-speaking participants reported more experiences of stress related to taking care of elderly family members. For example, one Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth expressed, "What is stressful for me is taking care of elderly relatives." Similarly, another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth expressed that a stressful life event is "taking care of my grandparents who are 50 years old."

In contrast, English-speaking participants mentioned family stress related to taking care of younger siblings. For example, one English-speaking middle school-aged participant mentioned, "I have to take care of my younger brothers and sisters … I have to feed them so they don't cry." Another English-speaking high school-aged youth expressed, "I am tired after school to have to cook and clean for the family … it's like being a second mom to your little sister."

Another difference between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking participants refers to acculturation conflict between youth and their parents. Specifically, Spanish-speaking participants of this study were more likely to report that their parents want them to maintain Hispanic cultural values, relative to their English-speaking counterparts. For example, one Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant expressed, "My father doesn't want me to become more American. They want us to stay like they are." Participants also expressed a variety of acculturation-based conflicts

related to generational differences. One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant reflected, "My parents are not familiar with American norms." Similarly, another Spanish-speaking youth reported, "Parents want you to maintain old country customs and values."

One area of stress specifically related to the immigration experience was expressed and encompassed themes related to family separation. One English-speaking high school-aged youth indicated, "Only one parent migrated to the U.S.," while another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth reported, "I have siblings in different countries."

A significant stressor reported by participants refers to substance abuse within the family context. Spanish-speaking participants were more likely to report family substance abuse, relative to their English-speaking counterparts. For example, one Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant indicated, "My father drinks too much." Similarly, a Spanish-speaking high school-aged participant expressed, "Alcohol and drugs are problematic." One Spanish-speaking youth mentioned, "My mother is abusive when drinking … calling kids names in anger." Parallel to this experience, another Spanish-speaking youth expressed, "My parents, both mother and stepfather, are angry and fight when drinking,"

Immigration Stress

Overall, many participants described stressors related to the immigration process, experiences of loss and isolation, and perceived discrimination. Spanish-speaking participants, however, more commonly discussed the process of immigration as a stressful life event in their lives, relative to their English-speaking counterparts. Participants of this study expressed stress related to immigration processes such as experiences of discrimination, having to leave family members behind, and challenges experienced while emigrating to the United States. For example, one Spanish-speaking participant from middle school said, "I came illegally with my sister. We went through a lot … assault, hunger." Another English-speaking high school-aged youth expressed, "Crossing the border you feel scared, and you are scared for the people crossing the border."

For many participants, coming to the United States for educational and economic advancement also required sacrifices and losses such as leaving family members, friends, neighborhoods, and memories. For example, one English-speaking high school-aged participant stated, "It's hard leaving family, friends and the neighborhood." Similarly, another English-speaking youth expressed, "What is hard is what you leave behind … parents, friends and children. You leave a life behind … leaving everything behind." A Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth expressed, "It's hard leaving family behind."

Although experiences of perceived discrimination were expressed by most of the participants, Spanish-speaking high school-aged youth overwhelmingly expressed this stressor. One Spanish-speaking youth expressed, "Discrimination … they laugh at you at school because you don't know English." One English-speaking high school-aged youth reported, "People make fun of you … call you Indians …the way you dress and talk and have an accent." Another English-speaking high school-aged youth said, "The media spreads fear about the Mexicans."

Peer Stress

A number of youth identified stressors among peer relationships they were involved in. Participants of this study indicated that significant stressors in their peer

relationships included drugs, gangs, neighborhood violence, and discrimination. However, middle school-aged youth were more likely to report issues pertaining to drugs (e.g., peer pressure, boyfriend using substances), relative to their high school adolescent counterparts, which constitute a significant stressor in their development. For example, one Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant expressed, "You are at risk of drug use, and you get offers to use cigarettes and alcohol." Another English-speaking middle school-aged youth described experiences of peer pressure from her partner as she stated, "My boyfriend is on drugs and alcohol and might want to get me on drugs." One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth said what is stressful is, "Getting picked on about drugs or asked for money."

In addition to issues related to substance abuse, youth also reported perceived discrimination from peers as a salient stressor. Spanish-speaking participants were more likely to report experiences of discrimination from their peers when compared with their English-speaking counterparts. One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth stated, "Some people judge people by color … dark skin people are viewed less than light skin." Another English-speaking high school-aged participant expressed, "They look down on immigrants … call them *piasas* because of the way they dress and talk."

Many participants expressed the presence of gangs and violence, such as robberies, break-ins, and fights, in their neighborhoods as a stressor within their peer relationships. For example, a Spanish-speaking participant expressed, "You are afraid to go out and intimidated by violence." Another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth mentioned, "There are break-ins, robberies in the neighborhood, car break-ins, house and apartment break-ins. Police often come to deal with violence and thefts." One English-speaking middle school-aged participant mentioned, "My boyfriend is in a gang which can lead to problems." Another Spanish-speaking youth summed it up by stating, "The fear of violence makes us tense."

School and Academic Stress

Youth in this study expressed the ways in which they experience school and academic stressors. Participants mentioned stressors related to difficulties in language and communication, experiences of discrimination, barriers to academic success, perceiving the curriculum as lacking cultural relevance, and experiencing gang violence all within the school context. However, Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth reported the most stressors by far. For example, Spanish-speaking youth reported stressors related to discrimination, failing classes because of difficulty in understanding English, not having parental support for academic success, having to move too often, and having to leave school to work.

Similar to stressors reported in the peer domain, the preponderance of stressors identified within the theme of school and academic stress were related to perceived discrimination, racism, and racial tensions. For instance, one English-speaking high school-aged youth expressed, "'Mexicans are seen as not smart and not succeeding." Another Spanish-speaking participant indicated, "There's racism and discrimination by native-born towards foreign-born." One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth indicated, "There is Guatemalan racism." Similarly, another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth expressed, "Blacks think they are superior to Hispanics because they are legal."

Participants also expressed stress and trauma related to experiences of neighborhood gangs and violence. For example, one English-speaking youth stated, "The

gangsters in school make me feel unsafe." Another English-speaking high school-aged participant expressed, "Not that I'm scared, but it [gang violence] is something that is always there in the back of your head." An English-speaking high school-aged youth indicated, "There is all this pressure to get you to join a gang." Another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant expressed, "You are preparing for fights rather than school."

Respondents reported language and communication difficulties, making school and academic success challenging and frustrating. For example, one Spanish-speaking high school-aged participant expressed, "I just came to school from Mexico and I don't know the language." Another Spanish-speaking high school-aged youth mentioned, "You're afraid to ask questions and you get made fun of." One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth indicated, "You're not able to do the homework." Another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant stated, "Sometimes you can't understand the teacher speaking in English." Similarly, a Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant expressed, "You fail in school because of English."

Other stressors related to school and academics involved perceptions that materials and curricula lack cultural relevance, perceptions of teachers negatively perceiving students, and home-related stressors that affect school success and involvement. For example, one high school-aged participant indicated, "You have got to pass all these tests and after a while you feel pretty dumb. If you think you can't pass the tests, then why come?" One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant stated, "Previous learning [in native country] doesn't apply here." An English-speaking high school-aged participant expressed, "They don't teach you about the history of your culture … about your indigenous culture."

Several participants mentioned family-related barriers to school success. For example, one English-speaking participant expressed, "I have no parental supervision." Another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant indicated, "I have no parental support." One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant mentioned, "We move too often." Finally, one Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth expressed, "Hispanics drop out to work."

One important area of stress that affects school success relates to unplanned pregnancy. Several respondents discussed this within the context of academic failure and dropout. English-speaking participants were more likely to report teenage pregnancy as a stressor, relative to their Spanish-speaking counterparts. For instance, one English-speaking high school-aged participant expressed, "Lots of Latina girlfriends get pregnant, so they have to drop out and get a job." Another English-speaking high school-aged youth indicated, "A lot of girls drop out because they are pregnant." Similarly, a Spanish-speaking participant mentioned, "Pregnancy … pregnant girls don't return [to school]."

Social and Economic Stress

Both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking participants highlighted the various ways in which they experience social and economic stress. Specifically, participants repeatedly emphasized stressors related to finances and school (e.g., purchasing school materials), difficulties in paying rent, health care, and experiences of discrimination from a broader community and social context. For example, one English-speaking middle school-aged youth described, "Parents can't afford to give you the books that

you need." Another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant expressed, "I'm not going to being able to attend college if I wanted to … you need money for college." One English-speaking high school-aged participant stated, "The White kids have an advantage. They have money to go to better schools."

For many youth, a stressful experience refers to not having the resources to pay rent. For example, one English-speaking high school-aged participant stated, "What worries me is the fear of not being able to pay the rent." Similarly, a Spanish-speaking middle school-aged youth expressed, "They can barely pay rent and can't buy food and they don't have money to give me to buy things." Another Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant expressed, "They have to pay the rent in halves."

In addition, some participants described not having the necessary resources needed for appropriate health care as an intense stressor. For example, one English-speaking youth described, "Having a big family is hard. You want something and you don't have money to buy medicine." Another English-speaking participant expressed, "Stressful is healthcare you can't afford." Similarly, another English-speaking high school-aged youth mentioned, "I can't go to the doctors because they [Parents] don't have insurance." One Spanish-speaking middle school-aged participant summed up the social and economic stressors experienced: "Lack of money, discrimination and no papers."

The most frequently expressed community-based social stressor by participants was perceived discrimination. For example, one Spanish-speaking participant expressed that what is stressful for them is "overcoming discrimination based on nationality." Similarly, another Spanish-speaking participant mentioned, "There are racist stereotypes like Latinos as under achievers." One Spanish-speaking youth described another experienced stereotype: "They stereotype Latinos as not hard working." In addition, participants described the ways in which they are discriminated by law enforcement. For example, one English-speaking participant expressed, "Cops are so racist to you." Another English-speaking high school-aged participant said, "There is police harassment."

Please refer to Table 1 for a summary of key stressors expressed by participants.

DISCUSSION

Informed by the social stress and minority status paradigm, this study sought to explore stressors and life experiences of a group of Hispanic youth. We were particularly interested to learn whether and how culture, stress, and the acculturation process vary by language spoken and middle school-aged and high school-aged youth. Hispanic youth in this study indicated experiencing minority status and acculturation stressors such as exposure to neighborhood violence, perceived discrimination, gangs, drugs, and acculturative stress.

Similarities and Differences between Groups

Communication and language stress. Findings from this study highlight the impact of acculturation on adolescent self-esteem and mental health. Specifically our findings demonstrate how language differences and language acquisition pose emotional challenges among Spanish-speaking youth. In some cases, these challenges seem overwhelming and result in youth feeling inadequate, hopeless, and stressful. In one

Table 1. Key Stressors Expressed by Participants

Stress domain	Spanish middle school	Spanish high school	English middle school	English high school
Communication and language	• Not knowing English • Having to learn English • Serving as family translator	• Not knowing English • Having to learn English • Serving as family translator	• Serving as family translator	• Serving as family translator
Family	• Taking care of elderly family members • Adolescent-parent acculturation gap • Family separation due to immigration • Parental substance use	• Parents not familiar with American culture • Parental substance use	• Taking care of younger siblings	• Taking care of younger siblings • Family separation due to immigration
Immigration	• Emigrating undocumented • Loss of friends and family members in home country • Perceived discrimination	• Perceived discrimination	• Perceived discrimination	• Loss of friends and family members in home country • Perceived discrimination
Peer	• Accessibility to drugs • Peer pressure to use drugs • Perceived discrimination • Gangs and violence	• Perceived discrimination • Gangs and violence	• Accessibility to drugs • Perceived discrimination • Gangs and violence	• Perceived discrimination • Gangs and violence
School and academic	• Perceived discrimination • Gangs • Country-of-origin education being irrelevant in United States • No parental support • Relocation and changing schools • Leaving school to work	• Perceived discrimination • Gangs • Not understanding English • Teenage pregnancy	• Perceived discrimination • Gangs • Not understanding English • No parental supervision • Teenage pregnancy	• Perceived discrimination • Gangs • Curriculum lacking cultural relevance • Teenage pregnancy
Social and economic	• No money for college • Family can't pay rent • Perceived discrimination	• Perceived discrimination	• Not able to purchase books for school • Lack of health care • Perceived discrimination	• Lacking financial resources to attend better schools • Family can't pay rent • Lack of health care • Perceived discrimination

recent study, these researchers found language differences in the school setting to be a major source of perceived discrimination among peers (Cordova & Cervantes, 2010). In addition, our findings suggest that bilingual youth living in Spanish-speaking households feel the extra burden of serving as family translators. Serving as family translator has the potential of affecting clear lines of family communication, family roles, and authority (family leader) positions, Previous research has pointed to the impact of intergenerational acculturation differences among substance abusing youth (Santisteban & Mena, 2009). Future research on the impact of language-related stressors on identity development and positive self-esteem are needed. Clinical consideration of language-related stressors, even when treatments are conducted in Spanish, are also crucial.

Family stress. Findings of this study demonstrate the impact of acculturation and Hispanic minority status on the experience of stress events. Spanish-speaking and immigrant adolescents reported more salient stressors related within family or intergenerational acculturation differences. The impact of coping with strong yet opposing family values on separation and individuation processes typical among U.S.-born adolescents is not well-understood and in need of future research. For example, respondents noted the degree to which family values and parental expectations result in conflict and stress. This mirrors earlier research among Hispanic adults, in which issues of family stress and cultural conflict were found to co-occur (Cervantes et al., 1991). Future research on youth within multigenerational contexts is needed, particularly as it relates to acculturation, to determine the impact of family demands on the task of separation-individuation. For example, it is plausible that Spanish-speaking participants come from less acculturated homes and, therefore, are more likely to experience three generational households, thus taking on the responsibility of caring for their grandparents. Clinically, these culturally based family demands have been discussed as keys to understanding and promoting healthy family systems (Santisteban & Mena, 2009).

Immigration stress. Study findings point to the unique stressors experienced among Spanish-speaking and immigrant adolescents. Our respondents highlight the experience of stressor events associated directly with the migration process. Some of our respondents noted clear incidents of trauma and violence exposure when crossing international borders. Another related area of the stress experience relates to family loss, material loss, and loss of familiar social contexts because of immigration. This abrupt shift in social context and accompanying family and emotion loss in the absence of adequate support systems has the potential for resulting in varying forms of depression. Clinical research on effective practice to work on issues related to separation and reunification in immigrant youth must be developed. Clinicians must also be sensitive to the impact of trauma, abuse, and violence exposure when treating recent adolescent immigrants and their families. Areas of much-needed research include how such trauma, immigrant family separations, and loss affect adolescent developmental tasks related to separation-individuation. Furthermore, future studies should examine age at immigration and experienced stressors, particularly as it relates to the developmental context for the acculturation process.

Peer stress. Findings in this study suggest younger adolescents were more likely to report salient stressors related to drugs, discrimination, and community safety and gangs. These younger middle school-aged students might be more vulnerable to the pressures to engage in drug use with less peer resistance capacity. In addition, younger

participants have higher stress appraisals of local community violence and gang related activities. Research on the affect of peer pressure and the development of peer-resistance skills that are culturally based in younger Hispanic adolescents are called for. In addition, clinicians should again be sensitive to issues of violence exposure, particularly among younger adolescents.

School and academic stress. Within the school and academic domain, the findings of this study suggest younger Spanish-speaking youth to be the most vulnerable to acculturation issues such as language difficulties and perceived school and teacher discrimination. At the same time, many of the respondents, regardless of age, reported the pressures of confronting drug and gang-related events within the school context. One important stress-attenuating factor appears related to lack of parental support and guidance to help youth cope with school-related and academic-related stressors. Strong efforts by school staff and mental health professionals are needed to help screen and identify youth, especially Spanish speakers, who lack consistent parental support or who might be transitioning from other schools or communities. These youth might be at a greater risk for school failure and drop-out. The relationship between school-related stress and adolescent mental health needs more study with a focus on best practices toward screening and early identification of high-risk youth. In addition, research on school policies and parenting practices related to Spanish-speaking youth is much needed from the perspective of healthy identity development.

Social and economic stress. Youth in this study mentioned the impact of parent economic stress on their day-to-day activities, and how financial constraints even affect schooling and academics. Clinicians should work to ensure that positive coping strategies are developed to overcome stressors related to economic hardships among adolescents. More research on the cumulative effects of economic and culturally based stress in adolescents is called for based on our findings.

It is particularly important to note that the stressors reported by participants occur in larger cultural and community contexts. Reported stressors, therefore, can originate and have an impact across multiple domains within the adolescents ecology, and thus adds to the complexity with regard to which stressors fall under which domains. For example, some language proficiency stressors expressed by participants are included in the school and academic stressor domain rather than in the language and communication domain. Thus, similar stressors can occur across multiple contexts (e.g., perceived discrimination).

Limitations

Because this was a convenience sample, data on participation and consent rates were not collected. Future studies utilizing a convenience sample methodology should also include these data. The results also reflect only adolescents' perceptions. That is, data on teacher and parent perspectives were not collected to contrast adolescents' statements or perspectives. However, the purpose of this study was to describe the life experiences of Hispanic adolescents with respect to stress. Nonetheless, future studies should include teacher and parent perspectives to compare and contrast adolescent perspectives. Another limitation to this study refers to not including percentages of respondents. Future studies should include percentages of respondents to better ascertain differences between groups. Finally, data were not analyzed by gender.

Future studies should include a gender analysis as Hispanic young women might have different experiences, relative to Hispanic young men.

Conclusion

As demonstrated here, a qualitative focus group methodology can be a powerful investigative tool to explore stressful life events experienced by Hispanic adolescents. Such information can prove essential in working towards a better understanding of mental health disparities in Hispanic youth subpopulations. The present study suggests that experiences of stressors vary by both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking adolescents and middle school-aged and high school-aged youth. Future research should examine the cumulative effects of minority status stressors experienced by Hispanic adolescent populations to culturally inform mental health preventive interventions.

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