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Explaining the Relations Between Acculturative Stress and Prosocial Behaviors in Latino Youth from the Midwest

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Abstract

Stressful experiences may weaken coping mechanisms, lead to maladjustment in adolescents (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and may also influence adolescents' relationships with their peers. Latino adolescents face unique forms of stress associated with their cultural orientation. One form of cultural stress that is salient to many Latino adolescents is acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is defined as stress that results from adapting to a new culture (Alegria & Woo, 2009). One specific behavioral outcome of acculturative stress is prosocial behaviors (i.e., actions intended to benefit another; Carlo & Randall, 2002). Acculturative stress may influence psychological processes that in turn influence the adolescents' social relationships. Specifically, adolescents who are experiencing acculturative stress may begin to feel more depressive symptoms and may gravitate towards more deviant peers. In previous research, acculturative stress has been positively linked with depressive symptoms in Latino adolescents (Crockett et al., 2007). Research has also shown that Latino adolescents become more at risk for deviant peer affiliation as they become more acculturated (Samaniego & Gonzales, 1999). This may be in part due to the increased pressure adolescents experience to engage in mainstream culture and distance themselves from their traditional cultures. There is also supportive evidence for the notion that deviant peer affiliation may have detrimental consequences for adolescents' social behaviors (see Carlo et al., 1999).

In an effort to extend previous research, the current study examines how acculturative stress influences Latino adolescents' prosocial behaviors directly and indirectly via depressive symptoms and deviant peer affiliation. The current study uses data from the larger NSF funded Latino Youth Care Project. Participants include 89 Latino adolescents from Nebraska (mean age = 15.24 years; range = 14-18 years; 68.4% female). Participants completed measures of their acculturative stress (Multidimensional Acculturative Stress Inventory; Rodriguez et al., 2002), depressive symptoms (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), deviant peer affiliation (Dishion et al., 1991), and their tendencies to engage in three common types of prosocial behaviors (Prosocial Tendencies Measure-Revised; Carlo et al., 2003). The results demonstrated that acculturative stress was directly, negatively associated with public and anonymous prosocial behaviors. Acculturative stress was also positively associated with depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms, in turn, were positively associated with deviant peer affiliations. Deviant peer affiliations were not significantly associated with prosocial behaviors. There were marginal, negative effects, however, between deviant peer affilia-

tions and compliant and anonymous prosocial behaviors. The discussion focuses on the influence of acculturative stress on prosocial behaviors via depressive symptoms and deviant peer affiliation and the impact of these results on future research and practice.

Keywords: acculturative, stress, prosocial behaviors, Latino youth

Introduction

Scholars assert that stressful experiences have negative consequences for adolescents' health and social behaviors. Stress can weaken coping mechanisms and lead to poorer health and less desirable social outcomes (Conger et al., 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). One specific behavioral outcome associated with stressful experiences is prosocial behaviors (i.e., actions intended to benefit others; Carlo & Randall, 2002). Stressful experiences may lead to lower levels of prosocial behaviors if the individual is overwhelmed by the stressor and is unable to cope effectively. Individuals who are overwhelmed by stress may become more self-focused and might be less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors or help others. Stressful experiences, however, may also foster prosocial behaviors if such experiences promote an orientation towards others. For example, "altruism born of suffering" is a concept that suggests that stressful events might foster emotional sensitivity and promote empathy and compassion, and ultimately promote altruistic and helping behaviors (Staub, 1997). Direct evidence for the associations between stress and prosocial behaviors is still limited and mixed. Nonetheless, there is evidence that stress is an important predictor of adolescents' adjustment and positive development (Conger et al., 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Staub, 1997).

One reason for the inconsistent associations between stress and prosocial behaviors may be that previous research has largely examined prosocial behaviors as a unidimensional construct rather than as a multidimensional construct in which different types of prosocial behaviors reflect different motivations for helping (see Carlo & Randall, 2002). Several previous researchers have demonstrated differential relations among various forms of prosocial behaviors and a variety of constructs

among Latino youth, including acculturative stress (McGinley et al., 2010), parental discipline (Carlo, Knight, McGinley, & Hayes, 2011a) and sympathy (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2011b). Therefore, it is important to examine the influence of acculturative stress on different types of prosocial behaviors in order to capture the complexity of the relations. The present study aimed to address this limitation by examining the influence of acculturative stress on six different forms of prosocial behaviors that are common among adolescents.

Acculturative Stress and Prosocial Behaviors

Mexican American adolescents may face unique stressors associated with their ethnicity and family background. One particular form of stress that may be experienced by many Mexican American adolescents is acculturative stress, which is defined as stress associated with demands placed on the individual that result from adapting to a new culture (Alegria & Woo, 2009). Mexican American adolescents may experience acculturative stress due to social exclusion and the feeling that they are barred from specific opportunities or aspects of society because of their culture of origin. These adolescents may be less likely to engage in high cost prosocial behaviors, such as altruistic prosocial behaviors. However, it is also possible that acculturative stress would be positively associated with specific types of prosocial behaviors, such emotional and dire prosocial behaviors. Acculturative stress experiences may foster sensitivity towards the experiences of others, which may facilitate sympathy and ultimately certain forms of prosocial behaviors.

There is limited and mixed evidence, however, on the associations between acculturative stress and prosocial behaviors. One study found no association between acculturative stress and early adolescents'

general prosocial behaviors (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, 2007). Another study found that acculturative stress was positively associated with specific forms of prosocial behaviors in Mexican American college students but was negatively associated with other forms (McGinley et al., 2010). However, the underlying mechanisms that account for the associations between acculturative stress and prosocial behaviors are not yet well understood. The present study aimed to address this limitation by examining depressive symptoms and deviant peer affiliation as mediators in the associations between acculturative stress and specific forms of prosocial behaviors.

Mediating Roles of Depressive Symptoms and Deviant Peers

Acculturative stress may be associated with depressive symptoms among adolescents because of the demands placed on individuals as they face challenges associated with adaptation to mainstream culture. Adolescents who feel socially isolated, struggle to feel accepted by peers or society, or experience discrimination may exhibit depressive symptoms such as a lack of energy and increased sadness (Williams & Berry, 1991). Research suggests that late adolescents who are experiencing acculturative stress are also more likely to experience depressive symptoms (Crockett, Iturbide, Torres Stone, McGinley, & Raffaelli, 2007; Hovey & King, 1996). This increased sadness and lack of interest in typical activities may then influence the social behaviors of adolescents.

Specifically, adolescents who are experiencing depressive symptoms may have a decreased interest in their typical activities. These adolescents may seek out peers who provide increased stimulation or novel experiences that they believe will help them cope with their negative emotions. Therefore, deviant peer affiliation may be associated with depressive symptoms among adolescents. These deviant peers may provide the novel, risky experiences that depressed adolescents feel will help them cope with their negative emotions. Existing research does demonstrate a correlation between depressive symptoms and deviant peer affiliation (Ferguson, San Miguel, & Hartley,

2009). However, the association between depressive symptoms and deviant peers has not been examined in Mexican American adolescents specifically.

Deviant peer affiliation may ultimately influence the social behaviors of adolescents. Specifically, when adolescents associate with deviant peers, they may be more likely to engage in behaviors similar to that of their peers (Maxwell, 2002). Thus, adolescents who affiliate with deviant peers may display more deviant behaviors and less positive, prosocial behaviors. Research has demonstrated that deviant peer affiliation is positively associated with adolescents' externalizing behaviors (Kim, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999; Maxwell, 2002).

Present Study

This study examined the associations between acculturative stress and prosocial behaviors via two important mediators, depressive symptoms and deviant peer affiliation. Prosocial behaviors were examined as a multidimensional construct composed of different forms of helping. The participants were high school aged Latino adolescents from Nebraska, which is an understudied population. Researchers have previously highlighted the need for more research on Latinos living in the Great Plains area (Rochin, 2000).

We hypothesized that acculturative stress would be positively associated with depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms, in turn, would be positively associated with deviant peer affiliation. Deviant peer affiliation would be negatively associated with prosocial behaviors. Based on prior research, the authors also hypothesized both positive and negative direct links between acculturative stress and prosocial behaviors (McGinley et al., 2010).

Methods

Participants

Data for the current study were from an ongoing NSF-funded study of Latino families in the Midwest (Latino Youth Care Project), which collected

data from Latino adolescents and mothers in rural and urban communities across the state of Nebraska. Only adolescents' reports were used in the current study. Participants were 89 Latino adolescents from Nebraska (mean age=15.24 years, range 14-18 years; 68.4% female). Some 66% of the adolescents were born in the US. For the participants who were not born in the US, there was a range reported for number of years living in the US (1 month-17 years). The participants were predominantly Mexican American (93.8%).

Measures

Acculturative stress. Participants completed a self-report measure of their acculturative stress

(Mexican American Stress Inventory; Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, & Garcia-Hernandez, 2002). For the current study, the existing pressure to acculturate subscale was used to assess stress associated with acculturating to mainstream U.S. society (7 items, alpha = .88, sample item: "I feel uncomfortable when others expect me to know American ways of doing things").

Prosocial behaviors. Adolescents also reported on their tendency to engage in six common types of prosocial behaviors (dire, emotional, anonymous, altruistic, public, and compliant; Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003). Dire prosocial behaviors include helping others in emergency situations (3 items, alpha = .70, sample item: "I tend to help people who are in real crisis or need"). Emotional

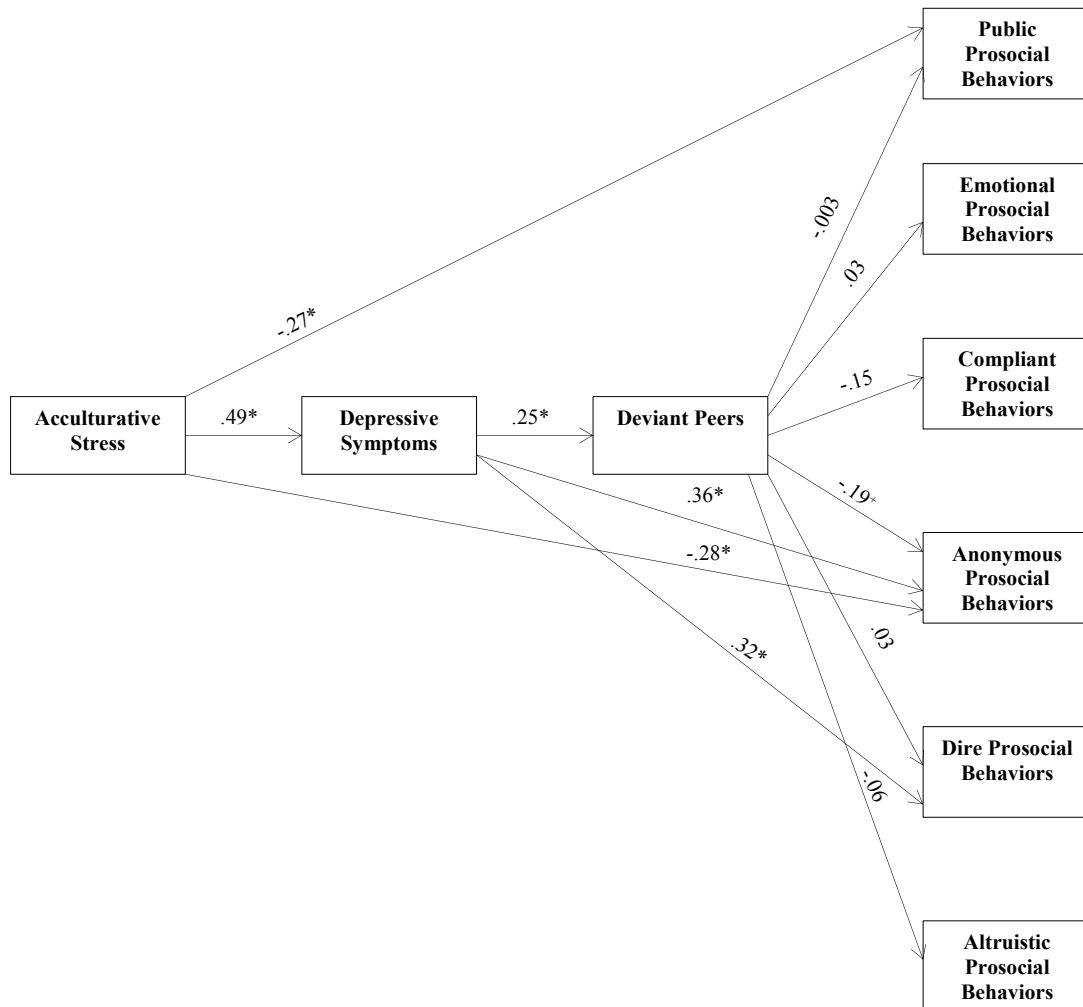


Figure 1. Path analyses demonstrating associations between acculturative stress, depressive symptoms, deviant peer affiliations, and prosocial behaviors.

prosocial behaviors include any helping behaviors in emotionally evocative situations (5 items, alpha = .84, sample item: “It makes me feel good when I can comfort someone who is very upset”). Compliant behaviors include helping when asked (2 items, alpha = .78, sample item: “I never wait to help others when they ask for it”). Anonymous prosocial tendencies include helping without being identified (4 items, alpha = .79, sample item: “I prefer to donate money without anyone knowing”). Public prosocial tendencies include helping behaviors in the presence of others (3 items, alpha = .88, sample item: “I can help others best when people are watching me”). Altruistic prosocial tendencies refer to helping others when there is no benefit to the self (4 items, alpha = .77, reversed-scored sample item, “One of the best things about doing charity work is that it looks good”).

Depressive Symptoms. Participants completed a measure of their own depressive symptoms (CES-D, Radloff, 1977; 20 items, alpha = .84; sample item, “I thought my life had been a failure”).

Deviant peer affiliation. Participants also completed a measure of their affiliation with deviant peers. They were presented with nine deviant acts and were asked to rate how many of their three closest friends had engaged in that act in the past year (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; 9 items, alpha = .88; sample item, “How many of your friends could have gotten into trouble with the police for something they’ve done?”).

Results

Structural path analyses in SPSS AMOS were conducted to examine the associations between acculturative stress, depressive symptoms, deviant peer affiliations, and prosocial behaviors (see Figure 1). The results demonstrated that acculturative stress was directly, negatively associated with public and anonymous prosocial behaviors. Acculturative stress was also positively associated with depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms, in turn, were positively associated with deviant peer affiliations. Deviant peer

Table 1. Descriptives and Correlation Matrix for Acculturative Stress, Depressive Symptoms, Deviant Peers, and Prosocial Behaviors

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Acculturative Stress									
2. Depressive Symptoms	.50**								
3. Deviant peers	.34*	.24*							
4. Public	-.19	.01	-.05						
5. Emotional	-.08	.04	-.01	.22*					
6. Dire	.02	.25*	.06	.35**	.71**				
7. Altruistic	.03	-.16	-.08	-.50**	-.13	-.36**			
8. Compliant	-.13	-.07	-.18	.13	.70**	.55**	-.03		
9. Anonymous	-.17	.17	.20	.51**	.56**	.64**	-.26*	.44**	
<i>Mean</i>	2.45	1.66	1.64	2.59	3.59	3.59	3.51	3.70	2.93
<i>SD</i>	1.07	.42	.67	1.11	.90	.86	1.05	1.01	.83

Note: p<.05*. p<.001**

affiliations were not significantly associated with prosocial behaviors. There were marginal, negative effects, however, between deviant peer affiliations and compliant and anonymous prosocial behaviors.

Discussion

The results demonstrated partial support for the proposed hypotheses. As expected, acculturative stress was positively associated with depressive symptoms. This is consistent with previous findings that suggest that adolescents who are experiencing social barriers and discrimination because of their culture are more likely to experience depressive symptoms (Crockett et al., 2007; Hovey & King, 1996). Consistent with our second hypothesis, depressive symptoms were positively associated with deviant peer affiliation. This result is also consistent with previous research demonstrating a correlation between depressive symptoms and deviant peer affiliations (Ferguson et al., 2009). Surprisingly, depressive symptoms and deviant peer affiliation were not associated with prosocial behaviors as originally hypothesized. This may be because of the size of the sample, because deviant peer affiliation was marginally, negatively associated with anonymous and compliant prosocial behaviors. Given the conceptual links between deviant peer affiliation and prosocial behaviors, it is possible that if the sample size were larger, these effects may have been statistically significant.

As hypothesized, there were also significant direct effects between acculturative stress and prosocial behaviors, but in opposite directions to earlier research. In this study, acculturative stress was negatively associated with public and anonymous prosocial behaviors, unlike a prior study with college students, which found positive relationships between acculturative stress and multiple forms of prosocial behaviors (McGinley et al., 2010). These inconsistent findings may be because of the age differences in the samples (the current sample used high school students). Acculturative stress may be particularly detrimental for younger adolescents' prosocial behaviors.

There were several limitations to the present study. First, the study was a cross-sectional design thereby limiting the ability to infer causal relations. Future longitudinal and experimental designs are necessary to discern direct effects or causality. Second, only adolescent self-report instruments were used. Future research utilizing multiple methods (e.g., observations, different reporters) is needed to minimize potential self-presentational demands and shared method variance. Third, research on more general and more representative samples of Mexican Americans and other Latino/as are needed to better generalize the findings.

Despite these limitations, the findings illustrate the importance of examining the associations between acculturative stress and helping among Latino adolescents, as well as the mediating mechanisms in these relations. These results can inform previous theories of prosocial development and stress as they contribute to the understanding of the complex relations between these behaviors. These findings may also inform program developers and policy makers regarding the experiences of Latino adolescents in the Great Plains and how acculturative stress, among other characteristics and experiences, may influence their helping behaviors.

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