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## A Review of Literature on the Effect of Immigrant Status on Hispanic Adolescents' Psychosocial Adjustment and Achievement

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### Abstract

In this literature review we examine the effect of immigration on the development of Hispanic adolescents and their ability to succeed academically. The issues of integrating identities, mediating family relationships and avoiding high risk behaviors and their impact on how these young people adjust are also evaluated. Successfully maintaining aspects of both cultures and healthy familial connections were key ingredients to promote an optimal environment for potential achievement, as well as appropriate buffers against ethnic discrimination or prejudice. The paper concludes with limitations of the literature as well as future directions. The findings of these studies support the need for greater diversity within school systems, as well as efforts to create environments that promote Hispanic adolescents' personal well-being and academic success.

**Keywords:** Hispanic youth, achievement, adjustment, immigrants

### Introduction

The opposition faced by Hispanic immigrants coming across the border into the United States can be detrimental to adolescents who are in the critical stages of forming their sense of self and the world (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005). Whether these individuals are born in the U.S. and have immigrant parents or actually immigrated themselves, they are often met with a great deal of prejudice and discrimination in school environments (Suarez-Orozco, 2010). In fact, patterns of immigration have been related to hate crimes directed toward Hispanic persons (Stacey, Carbone-López, & Rosenfeld, 2011). Relatedly, these

unwelcoming attitudes and behaviors by others have been associated with immigrant adolescents' ability or desire to fit in with this new society into which they have been forced (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008). In turn, these discouraged or hopeless attitudes also have been related to the degree of ambition that these immigrants may possess and the future that they plan to create for themselves (Han, 2008). A significant amount of research has been done on immigrants concerning their positive adjustment as they mature across adolescence, specifically in exploring the willingness to take on a new American identity (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008), family relationships and their influences (Schofield, Parke, Kim, & Coltrane, 2008), academic achievement (Suarez-Orozco, 2010), as well as participation in risk behaviors (Romero & Roberts, 2003). In this literature review, we discuss how Hispanic-American youth experience significant difficulties with acclimating to their new citizenship roles, whether immigrants or children of immigrants, and require a strong familial influence to avoid a detrimental effect on their abilities to create a positive and successful identity for themselves. First, we describe the concept and development of multicultural identity in Hispanic youth, and then discuss the influence their family situations have on their ability to adjust. We then examine how their academic abilities are affected by these aspects and how this contributes to their educational success, after which we explore into the consequences of both maladjustment and the acculturation process. After noting the limitations of this literature and future research directions, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

Identity and Group Membership

In order to settle properly into the American culture and begin to identify as a true citizen of the country, an adolescent must be able to combine both the family's culture of origin and the American culture. The ability to identify as a citizen of a new country makes it possible for one to adjust more easily, while continuing to develop in a healthy and appropriate manner. This is known as the Immigrant Acculturation Theory, which is defined as "the process by which individuals change, both by being influenced by contact with another culture and by being participants in the general acculturative changes under way in their own culture" (Bourhis et al., 1997, p. 370). Hispanic youth are, therefore, forced to determine the best method of combining the previous native values to which they were previously exposed, with those of their new host culture. How they choose to do so can affect the maintenance of their familial relations, which may result in challenges (i.e., acculturation gap) and how they identify themselves in academic settings (Fuligni et al., 2005; Schofield et al., 2008). Realistically, this immigrant acculturation model involves determining the value of immigrant culture and the actual desire to relate to one's host society, which could potentially influence an adolescent's decision to embrace or avoid the new culture altogether. According to Immigrant Acculturation Theory (Bourhis et al., 1997), there are four possible strategies for acculturation. Specifically, integration, which involves incorporating both the culture of origin and the current culture, is considered to be the ideal method, while assimilation rejects the original culture, separation rejects the host culture, and marginalization rejects both cultures. Bourhis et al. (1997) further add that the outcome of the chosen strategy also depends on the expectations of the original members of the host culture and how open they are to the acculturation process of the immigrants.

This degree of membership that is established through this process is a key

influential factor in the identity taken on by adolescents. Citizenship is an important component of one's identity, as it allows individuals to understand the rights to which they are entitled and the responsibilities that they are expected to uphold within this "social contract" formed with the government and fellow citizens (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008). The period of adolescence is a key time for developing attitudes toward citizenship, making it crucial for Hispanic youth to understand it and view it positively in order to ingratiate themselves properly into their host country. Identity is also influenced by the possession of allegiance to a group larger than the self and this great diversity of cultures of origin among American immigrants is likely to influence one's participation and attitudes toward citizenship (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008). If these environments are primarily composed of minority group members, then adolescents may experience stronger resistance toward identifying with their new culture. Fortunately, belonging to multiple cultures can support the development of positive identity in young people. Exposure to "appreciation and tolerance" for cultural differences can help to mediate the conflicts of ethnic and host cultures through social support (Le, Lai, & Wallen, 2009), which can be achieved through both a strong relationship with family and interaction with open-minded teachers (Fuligni et al., 2005; Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Casey, 2009). Not surprisingly then, attendance at schools with mixed cultures has been associated with ethnic minority adolescents' better understanding of different groups (Le et al., 2009). This finding may be a result of attending schools with primarily Hispanic students due to low socioeconomic factors (Suarez-Orozco, 2010). Making an effort to integrate students with different cultural backgrounds more efficiently could help the process of acquiring a balance between identities. Similarly, Hispanic girls tend to benefit more from mixed cultural friendships than do boys, which raises questions

about the effectiveness of this strategy across genders (Le et al., 2009). As a whole, it is clear that ethnically diverse communities can foster a stronger sense of belonging and identity to aid in adolescents' acculturation.

#### Family Relationships Among Hispanic Immigrants

Interactions between family members play a significant role in affecting the social behavior of adolescents, especially in immigrant families. In one study of primarily immigrant children (74%; 26% children of immigrant parents; Kuperminc et al., 2009), restraint had a positive and curvilinear relation to filial caregiving, though the nature of this association varied as a function of perceived fairness. Specifically, high levels of caregiving were linked to self-restraint only for youth who also reported a high degree of fairness. However, this positive behavior occurs only in situations that are perceived as fair by these young people as shown by Romero and Roberts (2003): adolescents tend to act out under discriminatory circumstances when they may feel their identity or culture is being threatened and respond defensively. Additionally, having more responsibilities in the home may foster more maturity at this age level, especially in families experiencing high levels of stress and pressure (Kuperminc et al., 2009). This finding may be due to the need for young people to take on more tasks at home, if both of their immigrant parents are employed. Furthermore, positive parenting and strong family cohesion can strengthen social problem solving, which can be applied in resolving cultural differences and identities, while adjusting more easily, as seen in late adolescence (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010). Family bonds are capable of influencing middle adolescents' perception of their own capability to interact with peers as well as how socially competent they are with peers, according to their teachers (Kuperminc et al., 2009). Moreover, Leidy et al. (2010) contends that having familial support can offset

environmental stressors of immigrant adolescents, which in turn tends to promote their adjustment in areas such as identity development. In addition, these relationships can help to buffer the effect of discrimination, thereby avoiding retaliatory behaviors in middle and late adolescence (Shofield et al., 2008).

A critical issue that immigrant families must face upon arrival in a new country is the conflict between parents and young people known as the acculturation gap, which can alter their relationships and adolescents' conduct. This gap is promoted by the language difficulties that are experienced by parents, as well as the resistance to often different parenting techniques common to the host culture and perseverance of irrelevant methods. Particularly large gaps are linked with parent-child conflict (especially among fathers), which can lead to rule transgressions by adolescents (Shofield et al., 2008). This "rebellious" behavior and family disconnect could initiate an inclination toward risky behavior or poor decision making in the future. In addition, frustration with adjustment to the new culture can cause adolescents to choose their host's culture over their heritage (strategy of assimilation), which may evoke parents' disapproval. It is possible to minimize this gap and its negative effects on the relationships between immigrant parents and their children in order to prevent problem behaviors and a lack of obedience though encouraging more communication and the acculturation strategy of integration (Leidy et al., 2010). Integration would call for the encouragement of a combination of both cultures, which parents can achieve through various forms of parenting to ease this adjustment for adolescents. Furthermore, the power imbalance faced by young people as a minority in society must not be solved using disrespectful assertions at home, although parents should understand its source and respond in a firm, yet mediating manner (Leidy et al., 2010). In contrast, it has been found that this gap is irrelevant when the

adolescent feels a greater sense of loyalty to their family and culture of origin than to the new society (i.e., separation; Bogard & Sherrod, 2008). In this research, the impact of the family dynamic on positive adjustment in Hispanic youth is clear, as well as the importance of these relationships in asserting a strong sense of identity.

#### Academic Achievement Among Hispanic Youths

Adolescence is a crucial period for academic development, as it influences one's choices about continuing education and possible career paths, and hopefully does so in such a way to minimize instances of poor school engagement and high school dropout rates (Suarez-Orozco, 2010). It is possible that Hispanic individuals in middle adolescence demonstrate lower achievement due to discrimination and being stereotyped as disinterested in education (Fuligni et al., 2005). This may cause them to stop putting forth the effort in school because of the low expectations held by those around them (Suarez-Orozco, 2010). They may also limit themselves to this stereotype because it is the only social group that appears to be available to them, and they want to fulfill their desire to belong. In addition, these early adolescents experience a great deal of segregation from others due to their limited English capabilities, which increases their risk for academic difficulties (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). Not surprisingly then, National Assessment of Educational Progress test scores indicate that nearly twice as many White and Asian students score in the proficient range compared to Hispanic students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Moreover, Hispanic adults 25 years of age and older are the least likely (60%) of any ethnic group to graduate from high school (compared with 82% for Blacks, 86% Whites, and 88% Asian Americans; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), even though variability within this ethnic group does exist. However,

adolescents with close ties to family and a strong ethnic identity are found to perform better in school, which can be related to the high levels of self-efficacy supported by families as mentioned previously (Kuperminc et al., 2009; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). Despite initial stigma against the academic abilities of immigrant students, it is possible that other contributing aspects of their lives, such as family and healthy acculturation, can reap positive educational rewards.

The macro-environment created by the school system can also play an influential role in Hispanic youth's academic performance. Immigrant families typically live in areas of lower socioeconomic status, which may include schools that provide a poor learning environment (Han, 2008). For example, teachers may discriminate toward these students, as found in middle adolescent studies, and fail to provide the proper encouragement or instruction necessary to aid in students' achievement, which relates to the "identity" study mentioned above (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). Additionally, schools in these areas may not receive proper funding to provide the necessary materials that students need to promote effective learning. Han (2008) has shown that school environments that are positive particularly benefit Latino youth of low socioeconomic status. This emphasizes the importance of providing these adolescents with academic opportunities in order for them to have a chance at fulfilling their academic potential. These environments may include stronger programs for ESL students and their families, as well as teachers who are more understanding of the challenges faced by immigrant students. Encouraging the interaction among diverse students is also important, as schools with less segregation have shown better performance among their students compared to schools with more segregation (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). Although this period of developmental adjustment is generally difficult for young people, "newcomer"

Hispanic youth experience an especially hard time. They often attend school systems with little technology and poor quality materials and experience parental separation during the "migration process" that native adolescents do not have to face, while often switching schools two or three times (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). All of these factors can have detrimental effects on the healthy development of Hispanic adolescents, which in turn, can result in poor academic performance and limited available options for their futures. However, with the proper support of the school district, familial support and balance between cultures, it is very possible for these immigrant students to exhibit higher levels of achievement in their host country than what has been previously shown.

#### Hispanic Youth and Negative Consequences of Immigration

With the combination of changes and emotional upheaval experienced by Hispanic adolescents during their acculturation to the host society, there is a significant risk of becoming exposed to negative influences or making maladaptive choices. A variety of stressors exist in their lives that can potentially lead to diagnosable cases of depression in these young people. High rates of depression among Hispanic youth, are likely to be due to these acculturation stressors such as learning a new language, being a minority, and other cultural adjustment challenges (Romero & Roberts, 2003). They further add that depressed youth may be more likely to make poor decisions in an effort to seek negative outlets to escape their troublesome circumstances, especially if there is an absence of supportive understanding. Additionally, these scholars note that these stressors are likely unique to the bicultural lifestyle that immigrant early adolescents are faced with on a daily basis. There are many adjustment issues and a common lack of appropriate resources necessary to promote these adolescents' well-being that are not present in the lives of native adolescents. The

main cause of stress reported by early adolescent immigrants was from conflict within their families, which may be caused by the existence of an acculturation gap (Schofield et al., 2008). Clearly, this is not a problem faced by those who have not immigrated or who belong to a culture different from that of their parents. Bicultural stress is also related to more "depressive symptoms" than other categories of stress in early and middle adolescence (Romero & Roberts, 2003). This may mean that it should be considered more dangerous and more capable of introducing one to harmful circumstances.

Eventually, it is possible for severe instances of stress to lead to participation in high risk behavior, as shown in studies among late adolescents (Schwartz et al., 2011). This may be the result of a buildup or suppression of emotions caused by resistance and discrimination that was experienced earlier in life, as one's response may play out later on in this developmental stage. This response may be a form of reactive ethnicity, which Rumbaut (2008) occurs often after an incident of discrimination or perceived rejection of self or one's ethnic group, wherein the individual identifies albeit defensively with culture of origin. This behavior has been found more in Hispanic youth, and may explain their decisions to take part in more drug and unsafe sexual-related behaviors than other immigrant groups (Schwartz et al., 2011). Such a trend may suggest unique circumstances faced by Hispanic young people that cause them to respond in such a destructive manner, while other groups are not driven to such lengths. However, this study has shown that identity acquired through healthy acculturation strategies is associated with fewer risk behaviors (Schwartz et al., 2011). This may be due to persistence of a stronger familial connection, despite the differences that create challenges between generations (Leidy et al., 2010). Possession of a strong sense of identity may be able to prevent individuals from making

poor choices in response to stress or cultural frustration.

#### Limitations

As in any study, those previously reviewed have several limiting circumstances that may have influenced the findings or outcomes that were reported. Several sampling issues were present that could potentially limit the generalizability or accuracy of the claims made about the population of interest, in this case, Hispanic adolescents. In examining participation in risk behaviors, the study only included late adolescent immigrants who attend college, which may serve to underestimate greatly the prevalence of this behavior in those who are not enrolled in college (Schwartz et al., 2011). A similar situation in an academic setting can be found in one study that reported high rates of attrition for "disengaged students," which may also underestimate the severity of the dropout rate among this population (Suarez-Orozco, 2010). These are two examples of sampling problems that can arise in academic institutions of low socioeconomic status, where a significant amount of the population of interest is not properly represented. In one study that examined the acculturation gap there were a variety of ethnic groups included in the sample, which does not allow for the parent-child conflict findings to be generalizable solely to Hispanic families (Schofield et al., 2008). Although the sample obtained by a study plays a key role in determining its usefulness in society, there remains a great deal of valuable information acquired through this research that can help to explain the experiences faced by Hispanic adolescents.

An additional limiting factor that several studies contained is the inability to provide causation for some of the reported findings, as only a relationship between the elements was able to be confirmed thus far. In examining the scholastic environment, it could not be determined whether a family's method of migration or their legal citizenship status in the

host country had a negative influence on the adolescent's attitude toward academics (Han, 2008). Furthermore, causation could not be found between the cultural influences of immigrants and their willingness to accept their new citizenship status, as only a relationship was reported (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008). Although it is helpful to identify connections between these different factors in the lives of immigrants, it is slightly inhibiting to be unable to confirm the causal roles that each factor plays. One final instance of this type of limitation is in the study that found stress in the home created more responsible adolescents, but could not say if this caused more responsibility in other areas of life (Kuperminc et al., 2009). These research gaps suggest possible route for further exploration or elaborations in future studies that investigate these correlations among traits in Hispanic youths.

On a larger scale, there are several overlapping issues present in these studies that may lead to a more limited scope of the issue. For instance, the studies did not always identify their adolescent subjects as actual immigrants or the children of immigrants, which could account for different abilities in accommodating to the new culture. Failing to take this status into account could also result in a poor understanding of the family background and how well the different generations are able to get along during this transitional period. Additionally, several studies also neglected to specify the exact area of origin for the subjects, which could potentially cause a difference in their abilities to adjust. It is possible that youth who migrated a further distance may experience a greater difficulty in adjusting to a new culture, as they were more removed from its impact on neighboring regions. By identifying the participants' original cultures, the studies could determine the degree of challenges faced by them on more specific terms. Although several limitations exist within these studies, it is hoped that scholars can address these limitations in their future work.

### Future Research

Despite the significant amount of research that has been dedicated to investigating the struggles faced by Hispanic adolescents during this key period in their development, there are several avenues that could be pursued to gain an even better perspective on this issue. The effectiveness of diverse communities on fostering healthy acculturation could be one pathway to build on, in determining whether this affects the sense of belonging in all immigrant youth or if it is only generalizable to those of Hispanic ethnicity (Le et al., 2009). If research was able to discover that only Hispanic youth, or perhaps only Mexican-Americans (but not Cuban Americans) benefit from this interaction, it could create opportunities of more effective acculturation support strategies targeted to particular groups. In addition, the concept of the "familial buffer" and its ability to shield negative treatment could be explored to find out specific ways in which this shield is effective for adolescent protection (Leidy et al., 2010). A more important aspect to look at may be finding the direct causes of depression in Hispanic youth, possibly through a longitudinal study to observe how stress levels change with age (Romero & Roberts, 2003). More research in this area could help to lower the above average levels of depression found in the population of interest, while preventing the negative choices to which it can lead. A final area that requires further research is relation between the timing of immigration and one's level of adjustment, as this may be different for adolescents who are the children of immigrants and those who actually migrated themselves. Clearly, there is a significant need for future studies about this population in order to grasp better what is necessary to help provide them with a healthy period of adjustment and effective resources to acclimate to their new culture.

### Implications

The research on this Hispanic immigrant youth has documented the importance of supporting the original culture by encouraging adolescents to integrate previous traditions and values with those of the American society. Any attempt to separate the two or avoid them altogether only has the potential to be harmful to young people's mental and emotional health during a time of heightened identity formation (Bourhis et al., 1997). One possible way to cultivate this combination of cultures could be through the development of programs that provide support to strengthen family relationships and maintain closeness between members. By sustaining close ties with those who are familiar with the prior heritage, as well as the challenges faced in being an immigrant, adolescents may be able to retain an ethnic identity from their culture of origin, while receiving guidance about how to mesh this identity with the new and different ways of American life (Shofield et al., 2008). Additionally, schools and other community groups can develop integration programs that offer resources to help young people with finding a balance between both cultures in order to adjust more quickly so they are able to reach their full potential as early as possible. A focus should also be put on campaigning around the country to promote the elimination of discrimination toward immigrants in an effort to avoid their classification within a negative stereotype. Placement into a degrading social category may hinder both the desire and opportunity that adolescents may have to succeed in the future (Suarez-Orozco, 2010). These negative consequences may be avoided by serious attempts to alter the popular opinion of Americans by creating more national attention concerning how this discrimination completely contradicts American values. Most importantly, efforts should be made to utilize the positive influence of diversity to aid with youth adjustment by setting immigrant families up in areas that are populated by mixed cultures



and socioeconomic groups. This could avoid trapping these families in areas that limit the adolescents' opportunities for development by surrounding them with such diversity that encourages integration, and in turn, supports their development. Many options exist for using this research to make a constructive difference that will help these overwhelmed and struggling young people to form their identities successfully in their new country.

### Conclusion

It is clear that adolescence is a crucial developmental stage and that the lifestyles and experiences of immigrant youth require investigation in order to provide them with a more positive and receptive environment. Unfortunately, many different factors in their lives are threatened after settling into a new culture or through the experience of being raised in a different culture at home, including their sense of identity, family relationships, academic achievement and stress. For those

Hispanic youth who lack a strong personal identity and closeness within their family, they experience increased rates of poor academic performance and participation in high risk behaviors for this population. It is important to note that some of these issues and circumstances are common to all groups of immigrants, though certain trends and findings are specifically relevant to Hispanic adolescents. Further research would be useful to examine the impact of these conditions towards Hispanic youth on a more direct level, while providing insight concerning how to best improve the current limitations and restrictions that exist in their lives during this assimilation process. By creating more attention and awareness surrounding the difficulties faced by these young people and their needs that must be met to support proper integration, it is likely that the American society will become more cohesive and provide an environment that better supports optimal adolescent development.

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