The Well-Being of Immigrant Latino Youth: A Framework to Inform Practice

A presentation based on the work of Mimi V. Chapman and Krista M. Perreira
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Overview

This presentation summarizes findings regarding the well-being of Latino youth in several domains important to functioning later in life (e.g. mental health, substance use, school functioning, early adult role-taking). Risks and protective factors that impact the adaptation of Latino youth in immigrant families are also discussed. A framework of practice guidelines is proposed to guide helping professionals in assessing the needs of Latino youth.
Introduction

- Latino population living in the U.S. increased by 58% over 10 years
  - 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000 (Schmidley, 2001)

- Health and social service workers are working with an increasing number of Latino clients
  - Helping professionals must understand the risk and protective factors for Latino youth
Introduction

- Latino youth face multiple threats: substance use, poor school functioning, early adult role-taking (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001)
- Risks are particularly acute for those who immigrate in adolescence (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001)
Mental Health

- Latinos more likely to be diagnosed with adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, and psychotic disorders compared with non-Hispanic Whites (Yeh et al., 2002)
- Latinos less likely to be diagnosed with ADD (Yeh et al., 2002)
- Latino females at particular risk for depressive symptoms and suicidal behavior (Yeh et al., 2002)
- Latino youth may be engaging in behaviors that put them at increased risk for mental health difficulties (CDC, 2002; Kaufman et al., 2001; Tienda & Kleykamp, 2000)
Substance Use

- Substance abuse of illicit drugs and alcohol is a problem among Latino youth (Gil & Vasquez, 1996; Warheit, et al., 1996)
  - Alcohol use is culturally accepted and may serve as a gateway to illicit drug use
- Percentage of Latino adolescents who use marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines during their lifetime is higher than for African Americans or non-Latino Whites (CDC, 1999)
- Substance abuse disorders in adolescents are often comorbid with mental health diagnoses and are often missed by clinicians (King et al., 2000)
School Functioning and Early Adult Role-Taking

- Completion of high school predicts improved life chances
  - School functioning influenced by individual, family, and institutional characteristics (Fernandez & Velez, 1989; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Ogbu, 1987; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Velez, 1989)

- Many Latino youth fall below grade-level work or drop out of school (CDC, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999)
  - In 1995 38.2% of young adult Latinos did not have a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics)
School Functioning and Early Adult Role-Taking

- Accelerated role-taking interferes with school performance - particularly relevant to Latino youth
  - Latinas are less likely to use contraception or terminate pregnancy resulting in teenage parents and early adult role-taking (Erickson, 1998)
  - For boys family monetary needs push them into the workforce earlier than their non-Latino peers
The Migration Experience: Leaving Home and Entering the United States

- **Stress is inherent in immigration** (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001)

- **Parents and youth experience immigration differently**
  - Parents may have made decision to immigrate
  - Youth may not have participated in decision to immigrate
  - Degree of voluntary choice of a stressor is theorized to be related to how one copes with that stressor (Boss, 1998; Rumbaut, 1991)

- In a completely foreign culture youth must make new friends, plan for adult life, learn to operate in the world outside of home
The Migration Experience: Leaving Home and Entering the United States

- Dual frame of reference: One’s current circumstances, no matter how dire, are viewed positively compared with difficult situation that prompted immigration
  - Children may have been protected from poverty or danger (unlike their parents) in their country of origin, creating a sense in children that what they gave up is not worth the hardships they endure as new immigrants

- Support in coethnic communities; attitudes toward immigrants; work opportunities; affordable housing; level of community services influence level of adaptation by the new immigrant (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zayas et al., 2000)
Acculturation and Assimilation

- Classic Assimilation (pre-1965): (Gordon, 1964)
  - Adaptation to U.S. gradual, but inevitable
  - Immigrants abandon culture of homelands and adopt cultural and behavioral patterns of U.S.
  - Full assimilation = complete abandonment of cultural identity; no longer differ significantly from European Americans

- More recent assimilation studies challenge classic assimilation perspective
  - High levels of assimilation associated with outcomes that differ from American norms (Zhou, 1997)
Acculturation and Assimilation

- **Acculturation:**
  - Process of assuming the values, language, and cultural practices of the new culture, which result in assimilation (Castro et al., 1996)
  - May put one at risk for problematic behaviors (i.e. substance abuse and mental health problems)

- **Acculturation strain:** (Gil & Vega, 1999)
  - Emotional difficulties experienced as immigrants adapt to new environment
  - Combined with previous stressful experiences and recent life events, this strain has been shown to impact depressive symptoms and other manifestations of stress
Family Functioning and Attitudes

- Intergenerational stress – exacerbated in immigrating families (Szapocznik & Williams, 2000)
  - Adolescent rebellion is unexpected & compounded when children are exposed to norms and expectations that are different from those in their home country
  - Parental depression may affect youth in a variety of ways
    - Predisposes children to develop their own depressive symptoms
    - Less positive interactions between parent and child due to parental depression (Lovejoy et al., 2000)
School Context and Discrimination

- In school, immigrant youth are exposed to native culture, experience discrimination, and form beliefs about what society expects from them.

- For Latino youth, percentage of Latino students in the school is a strong predictor of academic success or failure (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000).

- New immigrant parents may not have strategies for coping with racism that parents in other minority groups use to help their children cope.
Protective Factors in Latino Families

- **Respect:**
  - Teaching children courtesy and decorum in various social context with people of a particular age, sex, and social status
  - Among adolescents: emphasis on respect is associated with deference to parental authority, more cooperative behavior, less risk-taking that may be detrimental to health (Flanagan, 1996; Fuligni, 1997; Knight et al., 1993)
Protective Factors in Latino Families

- Familism:
  - Loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity toward family members (Cortes, 1995)
  - Family as an extension of self
Protective Factors in Latino Families

- Familism (continued):
  - Emphasis on family solidarity and support
  - Less child-centered approach to everyday activities
  - Frequent contact between family members
  - Positive attitudes toward parents by their children
  - Greater levels of satisfaction with family life

- The strong sense of family orientation, obligation, and cohesion appears to improve physical & emotional health and educational well-being of adolescent youth (Bird et al., 2001; Dumka et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2003)
Protective Factors in Latino Families

- **Biculturalism:** (LaFromboise et al., 1993)
  - Ability to move comfortably between two cultures
  - Ability to interact positively with dominant culture while retaining one’s cultural identity promotes optional functioning
  - Bicultural individuals have less stress and anxiety because they are not choosing between cultural loyalties
Proposed Framework: Background

- Rumbaut (1991): general model of how migration affects mental health outcomes
  - Describes interplay among political, social, and economic factors and individual characteristics that shape the context of the migration
- Factors include: motivations for migration, events preceding migration, demographics, SES, physical health, social supports, acculturation attitudes
Proposed Framework: Background

- Proposed framework adapts Rumbaut’s model to create an ecological framework that conceptualizes relationship between risks inherent in immigration, potential protective factors, and well-being of Latino youth.
Proposed Framework

Table 1:
- Presents series of potential relationships between exit experiences in home country, entry experiences into U.S., levels of acculturation and biculturalism, family factors, school experiences, and youth well-being
Proposed Framework

- Table 1 (continued):
  
  - Presents hypothesized progression of variables (moves from most distal elements of immigration experience to those most proximal to the child – the immediate family and school environments)
  
  - However this interpretation is strictly linear and likely inaccurate
## Proposed Framework

### Table 1. Ecological Framework of Latino Youth Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context of Exit</th>
<th>Context of Entry</th>
<th>Cultural Orientation</th>
<th>Family Context</th>
<th>School Context</th>
<th>Youth Well-Being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic</td>
<td>Socioeconomic</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Youth’s Perceptions</td>
<td>Mental Health Symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Biculturalism</td>
<td>Household size</td>
<td>School safety</td>
<td>Depressive symptoms</td>
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<td>Community size</td>
<td>Community size</td>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>Martial status</td>
<td>Teachers support</td>
<td>Anxiety symptoms</td>
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<td>Income/Wealth</td>
<td>Income/Wealth</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Adolescent parenting</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>Aggressive behavior</td>
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<td>Parent’s Migration</td>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>Biculturalism</td>
<td>Wealth</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Somatic complaints</td>
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<td>Motivation Experience</td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>Parents’ employment</td>
<td>Student–teacher ratio</td>
<td>Trauma symptoms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth’s Migration</td>
<td>Social support</td>
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<td>Parents’ health</td>
<td>Ethnic composition</td>
<td>Substance Use</td>
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<td>Motivation Experience</td>
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<td>Functioning</td>
<td>Class size</td>
<td>School Performance</td>
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<td>Cohesion</td>
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<td>Academic</td>
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<td>Adaptation</td>
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<td>School drop out</td>
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<td>Familism</td>
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<td>Adult Role-Taking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adolescent parenting  
Work participation
Proposed Framework: Applications to Practice

- Proposed framework can assist professionals in working with immigrant clients to consider a broader range of social contexts that may have direct relevance to current well-being.

- Framework supports many practice principles:
  - Ask parents and youth about motivations for immigrations and experiences surrounding immigration.
  - Determine whether different family members hold different frames of references about the immigration experiences.
Proposed Framework: Applications to Practice

- Practice Principles (continued):
  - Assist parents and youth in talking with each other about their immigration experiences and current experiences in the U.S.
  - Assess levels of acculturation and biculturalism and assist parents and youth in understanding the process of acculturation.
  - Look for ways parents may already be trying to assist youngsters in coping. Build on strengths.
Conclusion

- When ecological models are combined with a risk and protective factor framework, highly specified models may be created, such as the proposed framework.

- Proposed model allows a broader view of the social ecology of new immigrants:
  - Risk and protective factors and other contexts are equally important in promoting or hindering adaptation in U.S.
  - This model will assist practitioners in being more mindful of the contexts from which current issues emanate and their inherent risks.
References


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