

Running head: LIFE EXPERIENCES OF HISPANIC ADOLESCENTS

Life Experiences of Hispanic Adolescents: Developmental and Language Considerations in  
Acculturation Stress

### Abstract

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. Few studies have examined the acculturation process from the perspective of youth development, nor have there been studies of age or grade variation in the experience of acculturation stress among Hispanic adolescents. 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 six domains, namely: (a) immigration, (b) communication and language, (c) school and academic, (d) peer, (e) family, and (f) social and economic. Implications for future research on stress and clinical practice for Hispanic youth are discussed.

Keywords: Hispanic, Adolescent, Mental Health, Acculturation, Stress

## Introduction

Recent epidemiological studies suggest that the majority of non-immigrant 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, 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 versus high school aged) Hispanic adolescents, 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 affects on both the psychological and physical well-being of individuals and families. 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 may experience increased stress because of the inequalities found in the social organization in which the individual or family is embedded (Aneshensel, 1992). 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.

Hispanic and other minority adolescents in the U.S. 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, 2002; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

#### *Acculturation and Acculturation Stress*

Related to, yet distinct from, social stress and minority status refers to acculturation and potential acculturative stress. A paucity of empirical work in this area has been conducted specific to Hispanic youth or adolescent groups. Acculturation is a multidimensional process of socialization that usually involves dominant and non-dominant cultures (Berry, 2001). Individuals from non-dominant cultures experience a wide range of stress events tied to processes of marginalization, separation, assimilation, integration and biculturalism (see Agar, 1991). Minority status and acculturation changes (stressor events) constitute acculturation stress which is endemic in the Hispanic population and is hypothesized as an important antecedent for mental health problems in both adults and children (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder,

1991, Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991; Vega & Gil, 1998). Berry (1991), for example, described “acculturation stress” as the result of one’s culture of origin interacting with host culture values, attitudes, customs and behaviors. 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.

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, has 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 minority status paradigm and related stressful life events research (Aneshensel, 1992; Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991), this study aimed to examine issues of minority status and acculturation stress in a large study 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 versus English speaking. 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, an interview guide was developed and consisted of six grand tour areas of inquiry and potential probes. The six grand tour areas of inquiry included the following: 1) immigration stress, 2) communication and language stress, 3) school and academic stress, 4) peer stress, 5) family stress, and 6) 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 may otherwise not be obtained through measures and surveys which may require higher literacy capabilities (Morgan, 1997; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

All focus group facilitators conducting the interviews were bilingual and of Hispanic origin as suggested by Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004). Secondly, the focus groups consisted of same 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, 2004). Lastly, participants were given a choice to participate in either a Spanish or English language focus group interview.

### *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 U.S. A mixed stratified sampling strategy was designed to elicit information from middle and high school aged youth, and English 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 consisted of 4 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 (SD=2.20) years 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, Central American and Caribbean countries including Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. The majority 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. Father was currently employed for 68% of the sample and mother for 54%. 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*

Researchers were introduced to the teacher and potential participants of each selected classroom by the principal and site coordinator and were explained the purpose of the study one week prior to 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 pre-designated classroom. A sociodemographic questionnaire that included measures of immigrant status 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 6 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 which appeared to represent minority status and 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 which could not be coded in the initial coding scheme (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Trustworthiness of the data was established following the guidelines described by Morrow (2005), which consisted of methods to ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability.

## Results

Data were categorized across 6 major domains related to stress experiences. Specifically, these domains reflected both minority status and acculturative stress and included: (1) Communication and Language Stress, (2) Family Stress, (3) Immigration Stress, (4) Peer Stress, (5) School and Academic Stress, and (6) 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 and high school adolescents with respect to acculturation and minority status stressors within the communication and language context, there were some notable differences particularly as it relates to Spanish 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, Spanish speaking participant described the difficulties of not knowing the English language well and stated, "Talking...sometimes you understand and sometimes you don't understand. Then you try to talk

and you mess up.” Another middle school, Spanish speaking youth summed it up by saying, “It feels hopeless to not understand what is being said.”

In contrast, both middle school and high school 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, 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, 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. There seemed to be no notable difference between middle school and high school participants in 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 youth expressed, “What is stressful for me is taking care of elderly relatives.” Similarly, another Spanish speaking middle school youth expressed 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 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 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 and English 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 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 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 youth indicated, “Only one parent migrated to the U.S.,” while another Spanish speaking middle school 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 participant indicated, “My father drinks too much.” Similarly, a Spanish speaking high school 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 U.S. 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 youth expressed, “Crossing the border you feel scared, and you are scared for the people crossing the border.”

For many participants, coming to the U.S. 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 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 youth expressed, “It’s hard leaving family behind.”

Although experiences of perceived discrimination were expressed by most of the participants, it seemed more pronounced for the Spanish speaking high school youth. One Spanish speaking youth expressed, “Discrimination...they laugh at you at school because you

don't know English." One English speaking, high school 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 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 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 constitutes a significant stressor in their development. For example, one Spanish speaking, middle school participant expressed, "You are at risk of drug use, and you get offers to use cigarettes and alcohol." Another English speaking, middle school 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 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 to their English speaking counterparts. One Spanish speaking, middle school youth stated, "Some people judge people by color...dark skin people are viewed less than light skin." Another English speaking, high school 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 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 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 youth and middle school 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 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 youth indicated, “There is Guatemalan racism.” Similarly, another Spanish

speaking, middle school 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 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 youth indicated, “There is all this pressure to get you to join a gang.” Another Spanish speaking, middle school participant expressed, “You are preparing for fights rather than school.”

Language and communication difficulties were reported by respondents making school and academic success challenging and frustrating. For example, one Spanish speaking, high school participant expressed, “I just came to school from Mexico and I don’t know the language.” Another Spanish speaking, high school youth mentioned, “You’re afraid to ask questions and you get made fun of.” One Spanish speaking, middle school youth indicated, “You’re not able to do the homework.” Another Spanish speaking, middle school participant stated, “Sometimes you can’t understand the teacher speaking in English.” Similarly, a Spanish speaking middle school 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 impact school success and involvement. For example, one high school 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 participant stated, “Previous learning [in native country] doesn’t apply here.” An English

speaking, high school participant expressed, “They don’t teach you about the history of your culture...about your indigenous culture”

Family related barriers to school success were mentioned by several participants. For example, one English speaking participant expressed, “I have no parental supervision.” Another Spanish speaking, middle school participant indicated, “I have no parental support.” One Spanish speaking, middle school participant mentioned, “We move too often.” Finally, one Spanish speaking, middle school youth expressed, “Hispanics drop out to work.”

One important area of stress impacting 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 participant expressed, “Lots of Latina girlfriends get pregnant, so they have to drop out and get a job.” Another English speaking, high school 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 and English 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. The English speaking high school youth from community-based clinics were more likely to express stressors related to health care (e.g., not having health insurance), when compared to their counterparts. In addition, the Spanish speaking middle school youth from community-based

clinics were more likely to report experiences of discrimination and difficulties in paying rent, relative to the English speaking and non-clinical youth. One English speaking, middle school youth described, "Parents can't afford to give you the books that you need." Another Spanish speaking, middle school 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 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 participant stated, "What worries me is the fear of not being able to pay the rent." Similarly, a Spanish speaking, middle school 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 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 youth mentioned, "I can't go to the doctors because they [Parents] don't have insurance". One Spanish speaking middle school participant summed up the social and economic stressors experienced, as they said, "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 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 and said, “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 participant said, “There is police harassment.”

### 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 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 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 bi-lingual 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 where issues of family stress and cultural conflict were found to co-occur (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991). Future research on youth within multigenerational contexts are 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, and thus take on the responsibility of caring for their grandparents. Clinically, these culturally-based family demands have been discussed as key 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 as a result 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 re-unification 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. How such trauma, as well as immigrant family separations and loss impact adolescent developmental tasks related to separation -individuation is an area of much needed research.

*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 students may 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 impact of peer pressure and development of peer resistance skills that are culturally-based in younger Hispanic adolescents is 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 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 and academic related stressors. Strong efforts by school staff and mental health professionals is needed to help screen and identify youth, especially Spanish speakers, who lack consistent parental support or who may be transitioning from other schools or communities. These youth may be at greater risk for school failure and drop out. The relationship between school related stress and adolescent mental health need more study with a focus on best practices toward screening and early identification of high risk youth (Cervantes & Cordova, in press). 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.

### *Conclusion*

As demonstrated here, 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 and English speaking adolescents, and middle school 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.

## References

- Agar, M. (1991). The biculture is bilingual. *Language in Society, 29*, 167-181.
- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2009). 2008 *National Healthcare Quality Report*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality; March 2009. AHRQ Pub. No. 09-0002.
- Alegria, M., Canino, G., Shrout, P., Woo, M., Duan, N., Vila, D., Torres, M., Chen, C., & Meng, X-L. (2008). Prevalence of mental illness in immigrant and non-immigrant U.S. groups. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 165*, 359-369.
- Alegria, M., Mulvaney-Day, N., Torres, M., Polo, A., Cao, Z., & Canino, G. (2007). Prevalence of psychiatric disorders across Latino subgroups in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 97*, 68-75.
- Aneshensel, C. S. (1992). Social stress: Theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology, 18*, 15-38.
- Berry, J. W. (2001). A psychology of immigration. *Journal of Social Issues, 57*, 615-631.
- Blendon, R. J., Buhr, T., Cassidy, E. F., Pérez, D. J., Sussman, T., Benson, J. M., et al. (2008). Disparities in physician care: Experiences and perceptions of a multi-ethnic America. *Health Affairs, 27*, 507-517.
- Cervantes, R. C., & Córdova, D. (in press). Exploration of mental health issues for immigrant adolescents: A Latino perspective. *Handbook on United States Immigration and Education*.
- Cervantes, R. C., Padilla, A. M., & Salgado de Snyder, N. (1991). The Hispanic stress inventory: A culturally relevant approach to psychosocial assessment. *Psychological Assessment: A Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 3*, 438-447.

- Colten, M. E., & Gore, S. (1991). *Adolescent stress: Causes and consequences*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Coonrod, D. V., Day, R. C., & Balcazar, H. (2004). Ethnicity, acculturation and obstetric outcomes: Different risk factor profiles in low-and high-acculturation Hispanics and in white non-Hispanics. *Journal of Reproductive Medicine, 49*, 17-22.
- Córdova, D., & Cervantes, R. C. (2010). Intergroup and within-group perceived discrimination among U.S.-born and foreign-born Latino youth. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 32*, 259-274.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. (2005), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gonzales, H. M., Haan, M. N., & Hinton, L. (2001). Acculturation and the prevalence of depression in older Mexican Americans: Baseline results of the Sacramento area Latino study on aging. *Journal of American Geriatric Society, 49*, 948-953.
- Hovey, J. D., (2000). Acculturative stress, depression and suicidal ideation in Mexican immigrants. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 6*, 134-151.
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*, 1277-1288.
- Lara, M., Gamboa, C., Kahramanian, M. I., Morales, L. S., Bautista, D. E. H. (2005). Acculturation and Latino health in the United States: A review of the literature. *Annual Review Public Health, 26*, 367-397.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 250-260.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rice, F. P., & Dolgin, K. G. (2002). *The adolescent: Development, relationships, and culture* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Rogler, L. H. (1994). International migrations. A framework for directing research. *American Psychologist, 49*, 701-708.
- Rogler, L. H., Cortes, D. E., & Malgady, R. G. (1991). Acculturation and mental health status among Hispanics: Convergence and new directions for research. *American Psychologist, 46*, 585-597.
- Santisteban, D., & Mena, M. P. (2009). Culturally informed and flexible family-based treatment for adolescents: A tailored and integrative treatment for Hispanic youth. *Family Process, 48*, 253-268.
- Snowden, L. R. (2005). Racial, cultural and ethnic disparities in health and mental health: Toward theory and research at community levels. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 35*, 1-8.
- Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007). *Focus groups: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Suarez-Orozco, C., & Suarez-Orozco, M. M. (2001). *Children of immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Szapocznik, J., Prado, G., Burlew, A. K., Williams, R. A., & Santisteban, D. A. (2007). Drug

abuse in African American and Hispanic adolescents: Culture, development, and behavior. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 3, 77-105.

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Bámaca, M. Y. (2004). Conducting focus groups with Latino populations: Lessons from the field. *Family Relations*, 53, 261-272.

Vega, W. A., & Gil, A. G. (1998). *Drug use and ethnicity in early adolescence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.