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Culture, Spirituality, Self-Acceptance, and Relationships Among Latino Students

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While some research has been done on acculturation within the Latino population and the significance of spirituality has been included in a number of studies, there is very little research exploring the influence of these two factors in the formation of identity and relationships to others. This is particularly salient in lives of university students, as it is a time of finding their own niche in society and making decisions that shape their future. This study explores the influence of culture and spirituality on the acceptance of self and relation to others among Latino university students. The findings supported the hypothesis that intrinsic spirituality influenced acceptance of self and relations to others, while acculturation and religious community involvement did not appear to have a significant impact. The shift of relational patterns, compared to other studies. In the general Latino population, the study illustrates the importance of creating a campus environment that provides community and acceptance through crossing cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Culture, spirituality, self-acceptance, Latino, identity, relationships

In today's society the Latino American community is continually growing, inspiring additional research within this population. However, there is still a great lack of research done among Latin American university students, who are in a critical period of defining their own identities and patterns of relating to those around them. This study seeks to further understand the nature of acculturation among students, while also exploring the significance of religion and spirituality in that context.

Acculturation and Biculturalism

The term "acculturation" is broadly used to describe the process of cultural adaptation, usually in reference to a minority culture interacting with the majority or host culture. There are a variety of models used to describe acculturation, some outlining a linear process of adjustment, while others describe the more complex relational patterns with the ethnic and host cultures (Magafia, de la Rocha, Amsel, Magafia, Fernandez, & Rulnick, 1996). The linear construct suggests that the process of acculturation ranges from being immersed in the original, ethnic culture, to being immersed in the host culture (Gordon, 1995). Many measures of acculturation in past studies appear to be in line with this one-dimensional construct, based on factors such as language use and amount of time lived in the USA.

The second view takes a two dimensional approach, examining the relationships with both the ethnic and host cultures (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986). This study classified acculturation into four categories: integration (or embracing both cultures), separation (rejecting the surrounding culture), assimilation (rejecting ethnic heritage), and marginalization (withdrawing from both). This view of both the maintenance of the original culture and acceptance of a new culture falls more in line with the idea of biculturalism, the integration of both cultures in an individual's identity (Martinez & Maritatos, 2005).

The current study explores acculturation from a psychological approach, based on the sense of belonging and attachment to the ethnic and host cultures (Tropp, Erkut, Coll, Alarcón, & García, 1999). This idea is in some ways one-dimensional, but rather than suggesting a linear

progression, the level of appreciation for different components of each culture may be reflective of bicultural experience.

Acculturation & Psychological Well-being

When looking at the general outcomes of acculturation and mental health, discrepancies occur among findings. One meta-analysis of research among Latino Americans noted that some studies suggest that poor mental health is associated with being un-acculturated, while others support high measures of acculturation being linked to high levels of mental health problems (Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991). A third view suggested poor mental health would be related to the extremes of such a spectrum, but this had weaker levels of support than the other two (Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991). The broad concept of mental health may have contributed to the apparent discrepancies, making research of more specific components, such as self-acceptance, necessary for increased clarity.

Some research has been conducted to explore the relationship between acculturation and self-esteem. One study on self-esteem among Latino adolescents noted that biculturalism, or the balance of integrating the surrounding culture and maintaining culture-of-origin identity, influenced higher self-esteem and fewer internalized problems such as depression (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). The importance of the family was evident both through the positive effect "familism" has on self-esteem, and conversely, the strong risk factor of parent-adolescent conflict on internalizing problems. A similar study confirmed that parent-child conflict and depression were the key predictors of self-esteem, although familism appeared to predict less adaptation (Portes & Zady, 2002). Both studies identified perceived discrimination to be associated with lower self-esteem, greater problems with internalization, and poor scholastic achievement (Smokowski & Bacallao, Portes & Zady, 2007).

Another study comparing Latino students in the traditional education program with those in a bilingual program found that ethnic identity, measured by affirmation, belonging, commitment, and years in the USA, had a significant effect on self-esteem only for students in the bilingual program (Cavazos-Rehg & DeLucia-Waack, 2009). This finding may suggest that students who were more acculturated, or immersed with peers from a traditional school, were less reliant on their parents' ethnicity to find solidarity.

Similarly, another study found that self-esteem was positively associated with acculturation, while there was a negative relationship between ethnic identity and acculturation (Valentine, 2001). The relationship between acculturation and self-esteem is unclear in showing which causes the other, and may instead be reflecting a pattern of positive interaction with others from the majority culture leading to positive self-esteem.

In addition to personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem, which comes from group membership, both personal and private, should be considered when exploring the influence of acculturation (Giang & Wittig, 2006). One study compared self-esteem in Barry's four categories of acculturation: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986). While the measures of personal and collective self-esteem were both clearly higher for integrationists than marginalizationists, there was some variation of significance in other comparisons. An overall pattern indicated that a greater openness to interaction with other ethnic groups was associated both with positive individual self-esteem,

and some forms of collective self-esteem (Giang & Wittig, 2006), supporting the possibility that positive interaction with others can support multiple components of identity and self-esteem.

Overall, the research suggests that a healthy level of interaction with the host culture, and thus some degree of acculturation, is related to positive self-esteem. The influence of ethnic identity is less clear, showing some links to positive self-esteem, but also suggesting that it functions contrary to the beneficial nature of acculturation. When reframing acculturation or biculturalism as the level of identification with host and ethnic cultures, focusing on the psychological rather than relational components of adaptation, there is a lack of evidence on the influence of acculturation on mental health.

Acculturation, Religion, and Spirituality

A variety of studies has explored the significance of religion and spirituality in the context of acculturation. Some studies explore variations among different ethnic groups and religions. One study of minority groups and religious orientations found that gender, religious affiliation, and ethnicity accounted for 41% of variation between intrinsic and extrinsic forms of religion (Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2006). Significant differences in religiosity included women as more intrinsically oriented than men, and Roman Catholics, Evangelical, and Protestant Christians with higher degrees of intrinsic orientation than those reporting no religious preference. The significant relationships of intrinsic orientation and acculturation differed among various ethnicities. A significant negative correlation occurred between intrinsic orientation and acculturation for Asian Americans and African Americans, and a positive correlation between intrinsic orientation and feelings of alienation for Asian Americans. Patterns of alienation and lower acculturation corresponding with greater displays of religiosity and commitment were evident overall but insignificant for the Latino American sample.

Additional differences in religious involvement based on ethnicity were evident in a study of middle-aged women (Fitchett, Murphy, Kravitz, Everson-Rose, Krause, & Powell, 2007). Religious involvement was highest among predominantly Catholic Hispanic women and Protestant African American women. The authors suggested that religion served as a means of compensation for marginalization, whether serving as a bridge across cultures or a buffer for maintaining their own cultures. A case study on religious involvement of adolescents living as expatriates (Third Culture Kids), found that adults who were considered trustworthy could have a positive influence on adolescents' worship attendance in an international congregation (Powell, 2008). The significance of individual relationships in a cross-cultural environment may suggest that the quality of adult-adolescent relationships may be a means of preventing marginalization. A religious community not defined by ethnicity may serve as positive context for acceptance.

The variation between cultures in the significance of religion and spirituality make related results difficult to generalize across ethnicities, thus providing reason to perform studies within specific ethnic groups. Several studies have been conducted within the Latino population on the effects of religious involvement and spirituality, with varying results. One study done with adults from a Mexican background found that both religious attendance and religious salience had an inverse relation to depressive symptoms, suggesting religious involvement may hold value not only from the sense of community found, but also the perception of meaning and

purpose (Ellison, Finch, Ryan, & Salinas, 2009). However, the same study found that stressors related to migration and acculturation had a more negative effect on individuals who were highly religious. The authors suggested possible explanations could include a greater propensity toward feeling shame related to an illegal status or evidence of a maladaptive form of religious coping. The absence of causal explanation verified the need for additional research regarding the relationship between religion and acculturation.

Another study within a Latino population did not find that those who were religious experienced less stress in the acculturation (Calvalcante & Schleef, 2005). Instead, the authors suggested maintaining high religious involvement could hamper the assimilation process, reducing the need to learn English or the means of adapting to the surrounding customs and norms. Conversely, involvement in a religious setting within the surrounding culture, such as shifting from Catholicism to the Protestant faith, could facilitate adaptation in the dominant culture (Calvalcante & Schleef, 2005).

Although these studies examine religion in the context of acculturation with mixed results, they are limited to the outward forms of religiosity. There appears to be even less research done on the influence of spirituality on acculturation. One evaluation of an intervention program for Latinas in a "colonia" community sought to measure spiritual well-being (Guinn & Vincent, 2002). While the study found that participants displayed a higher level of spiritual well-being, supporting the value in community-based programs, it did not explore the effects of existing spirituality on the acculturation process. The authors also emphasized that "the importance of the spiritual dimension for this population cannot be overstated as it is considered the core of wellness" (Guinn & Vincent, 2002, p. 389).

Independent of minority populations, a variety of research has examined the effects of religious involvement and spirituality on mental health. In a study on college freshmen, spirituality was found to be linked to self-esteem (Hayman, Kurpius, Befort, Nicpon, Hull-Blanks, Sollenberger, & Huser, 2007). Religion and spirituality have been repeatedly shown to be beneficial for mental health, including serving as a buffer for stressor such as cultural adaptation (Hsu, Krageloh, Shepherd, & Billington, 2009).

Hypotheses

The current study seeks to identify the influence religious involvement and spirituality have on mental well-being. With the apparent influence of both acculturation and religion or spirituality on mental health, this study seeks to identify how these factors predict the acceptance of self and relations to other Latino American students. The first hypothesis is that psychological acculturation will account for a significant variation in acceptance of self and quality of relations to others. The second hypothesis holds that intrinsic spirituality and religious involvement will influence acceptance of self and quality relations to others. Because of the variety of findings on the positive or negative effects of these factors, this study seeks to provide further clarification on the outcomes.

Method

Participants

The participants were Latino American university students living around the United States. The N of 69 included students from undergraduate (69.6%) and graduate (30.4%) programs, public community colleges and state universities (27.5%), private secular universities (18.8%), and private faith-based universities (53.6%). There were far more females (78.3%) than males (21.7%). Some 34.3% of the sample were first-generation immigrants, 47.8% had parents who immigrated to the US, 3% were in the third generation, and the remaining 15% came from families with four or more generations living in the US. Participants were recruited primarily through online networking and requests through faculty at universities. The survey was completed online.

Instruments

Psychological Acculturation Scale (PAS). This scale was created to measure acculturation according to an individual's sense of belonging and attachment to the Hispanic and Anglo American cultures (Tropp, Erkut, Coll, Alarcón, & García, 1999). It consists of ten items, scored on a Likert scale, ranging from 1, "Only Hispanic/Latino, to 9, "Only Anglo/American." In the three original studies done, the coefficient alphas were .85, .83, and .91, showing the scale to be highly reliable (Tropp, Erkut, Coll, Alarcón, & García, 1999).

Organizational religiousness. Two scales were used to measure external involvement in religion. Attendance was measured with two questions on a Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 9 (Several times a week), and measured involvement in religious services and other activities related to a place of worship (Idler, 2003). The second is that of fit with one's religious congregation, and consists of four questions measured on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree), exploring the significance of and commitment to a congregation (Idler).

Daily spiritual experiences. This 14 item scale is designed to assess an "individual's perception of the transcendent (God, the divine) in daily life and the perception of interaction with, or involvement of, the transcendent in life" (Underwood, 2003, p.11). It is not limited to a single religion, instead exploring the evidence of spirituality in an individual's daily life, measuring the experience on a Likert scale ranging from 1, "Many times a day," to 6, "Never or almost never." In previous studies the coefficient alpha has ranged from .91 to .95 (Underwood, 2003).

The Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being. Two scales of psychological well-being were used, Positive Relations with Others and Self-Acceptance. Questions are scored on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with some items measured inversely. The Self-Acceptance scale (coefficient alpha = .91) suggests the high scores reflect a positive attitude towards oneself, an acknowledgement and acceptance of good and bad qualities of oneself, and an overall positive view of one's life in the past. Low scores suggest dissatisfaction with the self, disappointment about the past, disliking certain qualities, and a desire to be different (Ryff, 1989). The Positive Relations with Others scale (coefficient alpha = .88) describes high scorers as having warm, trusting relationships, showing concern for others' well-being, capacities for empathy, affection, and intimacy, and an understanding of the reciprocal nature of

relationships. In contrast, low scores reflect a lack of close relationships, difficulty showing warmth and concern for others, isolation and frustration about forming relationships, and unwillingness to sustain relationships through making compromises.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Data were screened to eliminate incomplete surveys and account for missing data. Some variables showed a disproportionate distribution, particularly gender (21.7% male and 78.3% female), type of university (18.8% secular/private, 53.6% religious/private, and 27.5% public or state institution), and generation (33.3% first, 46.4% second, 2.9% third, 7.2% fourth, and 7.2% fifth or higher). Because of the small sample size (n = 69), these variables were taken into account for the general demographic descriptions, but not used as variables in analyses.

Variables were also examined for normality using the Kolmogorav-Smirnov Goodness-of-Fit Test. Normality was not met for religious participation (D = .135, p < .05), relations with others, (D = .111, p < .05), and spirituality (D = .132, p < .05). When further examining the histograms it was evident that the religious involvement was not distributed as expected, showing insufficient fit to a bell-curve, and a kurtosis of -1.34. The other variables were more evenly distributed on a bell-curve, and measures of kurtosis and skewness all fell between -1 and 1. They were thus retained, but used with caution. Scales for self-acceptance and acculturation met the standards for normalcy.

Acculturation

The Psychological Acculturation Scale (PAS) displayed a Cronbach's alpha of .92 in the current study, confirming its reliability. The mean average of the 10 items was M = 4.49, SD = 1.44. There was also a significant correlation between PAS and the use of Spanish and English at home, $r(68) = .511$, $p < .001$, which is consistent with the use of language being commonly used to measure acculturation. In addition, of the subgroup of first generation Latinos, there was a significant negative correlation found between the age of arrival in the USA and the level of acculturation of $r(24) = -.506$, $p = .004$, suggesting that arrival at a younger age corresponded with an increased association with the Anglo-American culture.

Contrary to the original hypothesis, the measure of acculturation had no significant correlations with spirituality, $r(68) = .085$, $p = .491$, organizational religiousness, $r(68) = .047$, $p = .705$, or belonging in a religious community, $r(68) = .187$, $p = .127$. There were also no correlations between acculturation and any mental health variables measured: Positive Relations with Others, $r(69) = -.038$, $p = .759$, Self-Acceptance, $r(69) = -.058$, $p = .638$, and Autonomy, $r(68) = -.058$, $p = .740$. When further examining the acculturation data, it appeared that the majority of participants (59.4%) had an average score between 3 and 6 on a scale from 1 to 9, suggesting a predominantly bi-cultural trend in the sample. Thus, caution must be used when interpreting the findings to suggest that levels of acculturation or biculturalism has minimal influence on mental health.

Religion and Spirituality

Two analyses were conducted to examine the influence of spirituality and belonging in a religious community on components of psychological well-being. The first step-wise regression was conducted to determine the influence of spirituality and religious fit on Positive Relations with Others. The religious fit variable was excluded, showing no significant influence on Positive Relations (p=.383). Spirituality was a significant factor, R^2= .088, p= .013, suggesting the measure of spirituality accounted for 8.8% of the variability. This suggests that although limited, intrinsic spirituality influences one's relationships, while religious fit does not display significant contribution.

The same form of step-wise regression was conducted with Self-Acceptance as the dependent variable. Similar results were evident, as spirituality accounted for 5.8% of its predictability (R^2 = .058, p = .046), but religious belonging was excluded (p = .652). Although spirituality appears to have less of an impact on self-acceptance than it does on relationships with others, both regressions show it has more influence than external forms of religion.

Discussion

The findings did not support the first hypothesis that psychological acculturation will account for a significant variation in acceptance of self and relations to others, and only partially supported the second hypothesis that intrinsic spirituality and religious involvement influence acceptance of self and relations to others.

The results showed no direct influence of psychological acculturation on self-acceptance or relations to others. The small sample size (N = 69) limited to university students, calls for precaution in interpretation. Nevertheless, this lack of relationship, coupled with previous discrepancies regarding the positive or negative influence of acculturation, brings assumptions made into question. In other words, there may not be an "optimal" level of acculturation or identification with the host culture.

A second factor to keep in mind is the context of the university. As students, the majority of participants have likely had extensive exposure to and interaction with the majority culture. Their relationships with others may be based more on the university environment, whether through classes, campus housing, or other extracurricular activities, although cultural differences and similarities will always be a factor. Further research regarding the university settings, whether measuring the diversity of the student population or amount of involvement among different ethnic groups, may provide more insight into patterns of developing positive relationships while embracing a bicultural identity.

The second set of analyses, assessing the impact of spirituality and wellness of fit in a religious community also showed interesting results. The lack of significant influence from the religious community may also be related to the university context, as students may find an alternative means of meeting the need for community involvement through the university. Previous research showing the function of a religious community as a buffer in the midst of acculturation stressors (Fitchett, Murphy, Kravitz, Everson-Rose, Krause, Powell, 2007; Ellison, Finch, Ryan, & Salinas, 2009) may be less applicable after leaving home and entering a period of life where social life is not necessarily centered on a religious institution. On the other hand,

spirituality did have a significant impact on both relationships and self-acceptance. This intrinsic form of spirituality may remain more of a constant, a source of strength and comfort in the midst of the daily stressors. The direct relationship between intrinsic spirituality and self-acceptance may be more easily understood than the impact of spirituality on patterns of relationships. However, a perception of a positive relationship with God may run parallel to the quality of relationships with others. The findings suggest that further research on intrinsic spirituality may be beneficial to identify means of promoting psychological well-being.

Limitations and Implications

The most significant limitation for this study was the small sample size. While efforts were made on multiple fronts to encourage participation, there was a very limited response. In addition, there is no guarantee of random sampling, as the request was distributed both through public networking sites and contacts within universities. Secondly, not all measures showed normalcy, requiring the exclusion of religious involvement in the analyses conducted. This limited the exploration of extrinsic religiosity as a factor for psychological well-being. Third, the findings among university students may not be directly applicable to the overall Hispanic population, as it is a unique phase of life that might include greater involvement in the majority culture. Additional participation in the current study and future research comparing these factors with other minority growth may provide a more complete view of impact of religion and spirituality, as well as exploring different components of acculturation.

While previous research in the Latino American context has shown that religious community involvement impacts various forms of mental health, one implication of this study does not find that theme to be evident in this sub-population of university students. This finding, combined with that lack of significance from acculturation, suggests that living in a university context may re-structure patterns of building relationships. The shift of relational patterns illustrates the importance of creating a campus environment that provides community and acceptance through crossing cultural boundaries. The ongoing significance of intrinsic spirituality, despite the differences in settings, provides further motivation to appreciate and encourage students' expression of their own faith. Future research is needed to determine effective means of building a supportive community on campus and facilitating spiritual growth.

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