

## Mexican immigrant wives' acculturative stress and spouses' marital quality: The role of wives' marriage work with husbands and close friends

By: Yuliana Rodriguez, [Heather M. Helms](#), [Andrew J. Supple](#), and Natalie D. Hengstebeck

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### **Abstract:**

With a sample of 120 Mexican-origin couples, we examined the extent to which wives' marriage work (i.e., discussions about marital concerns) with husband and marriage work with friend moderated associations between wives' acculturative stress and spouses' marital satisfaction and marital negativity. Results from a series of multiple regression analyses showed that wives' marriage work with husbands (a) served to protect husbands' marital quality from wives' acculturative stress and (b) was linked with greater marital satisfaction for wives. These findings represent an important first step in understanding the sociocultural factors that compromise and protect marital quality for couples of Mexican origin as they navigate the challenges of adapting to life in the United States.

**Keywords:** acculturative stress | Mexican Americans | marital quality | marital satisfaction | marital negativity | marriage work

### **Article:**

Currently, Latinos represent the largest minority group in the nation with a record 50.5 million residents in the United States in 2010 and with those of Mexican-origin making up the largest subgroup (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Despite the growth of this population that marries young, places a high value on marriage, and has high marriage rates, very little is known about the marital experiences of couples of Mexican origin living in the United States (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Recent reviews of both the marital and immigrant family literatures underscore the lacuna of scholarly attention given to the study of marriage among immigrant couples (Glick, 2010; Helms, 2013). Although scholars have provided theoretical foundations for examining the links between contextual stressors and marital quality among immigrants and Mexican-origin couples specifically (Helms, Supple, & Proulx, 2011; Huston, 2000), few studies have empirically examined the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples in the past decade (Falconier, 2013; Helms et al., 2014; Wheeler, Updegraff, & Thayer, 2010).

The lack of knowledge regarding the marital experiences of immigrants is particularly problematic for couples of Mexican origin living in the United States who have higher rates of marital dissolution during the child-rearing years than those in Mexico and their White counterparts in the United States (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005). Scholars have speculated that marital quality for Latino immigrants is potentially compromised due to stressors faced during the process of cultural adaptation by this group (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Moreover, recent research documents that Mexican-origin wives may be uniquely vulnerable to a variety of sociocultural stressors and underscores the importance of attending to the transmission of stress from wives' experiences during the process of cultural adaptation to both their own and their husbands' marital quality (Helms et al., 2014; Parrado & Flippen, 2005).

Although scant, research does exist documenting links between a variety of contextual stressors and individual or marital well-being for Latino and other immigrant populations, particularly for women (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Hirsch, 2003; Landale, 1997; Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, & Garcia-Hernandez, 2002). An examination of sociocultural factors that may compromise or protect Mexican immigrant spouses' marital quality in the face of stressors that one or both spouses might experience has been theoretically proposed but remains largely empirically untested. The extent to which wives garner support specific to marriage and family life has been identified as an important and understudied function of social networks that may serve as a social resource for Mexican immigrant women as they navigate the stressors of adapting to life in a new country. Understanding the extent to which wives can rely on their husbands and close friends as sources of support specific to marriage (i.e., marriage work) is argued to be particularly relevant for marital quality for couples who reside in relatively new settlement states—a context in which wives are often geographically separated from their own mothers, sisters, or female kin (Helms et al., 2011; Parrado & Flippen, 2005).

Wives' reliance on their husbands, kin, and friends as sources of advice, guidance, and emotional support regarding the routine transactions of marriage and parenthood has been documented across social classes in predominantly non-Latino White populations (Burger & Milardo, 1995; Harrison, 1998; Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003; Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000; Oliner, 1989; Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004). This body of literature suggests that wives' active engagement with their husbands and close friends regarding concerns related to marriage may serve to buffer marriage against the affects of a variety of contextual stressors (Erickson, 1993; Helms et al., 2011; Proulx et al., 2004; Simons, Whitbeck, Melby, & Wu, 1994). Furthermore, recent work with Latino immigrant women living in new settlement states characterized by wives' more limited contact with their own female kin and close friends underscores the importance of wives' reliance on their husbands (more so than their kin or nonkin friends) as a response to the stressors associated with adapting to life in a new country (Bender, Castro, & O'Donnell, 1999; Hoban, 2005; Parrado & Flippen, 2005). In this way, it may be that stressors associated with immigration are particularly detrimental for the marriages of wives who, due to geographic dislocation, can no longer rely on their own female kin as sources of marriage work and who are unable (or unwilling) to seek out their husbands in this way. Furthermore, socioecological approaches to the study of marriage (Helms et al., 2011; Huston, 2000) would suggest that to the extent that wives' active engagement with their

husbands and close friends regarding marital issues is a behavioral process that enhances marital communication, joint problem-solving, and adaptive support-seeking, husbands' marital satisfaction may also be buffered from the potential negative effects of wives' acculturative stress.

Accordingly, in this study, we examine the links between Mexican immigrant wives' perceptions of acculturative stress and spouses' marital satisfaction and negativity. In the context of stressors associated with cultural adaptation, we hypothesized that the links between wives' acculturative stress and spouses' perceptions of marital quality would be moderated by the extent to which wives discussed marital concerns (i.e., marriage work) with their closest friend and their husband. This work expands on a literature predominated by studies of White and middle-class marriages and incorporates principles from Huston's (2000) socioecological model of marriage to better understand the marital implications of Mexican immigrant wives' experiences of stress related to cultural adaptation and the relational factors (i.e., marriage work with friend and husband) that may moderate this link.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Huston's (2000) social ecology of marriage framework orients researchers to study marital quality from an ecological perspective that acknowledges the social embeddedness of marital relationships. His perspective has been applied to the study of Mexican-origin couples specifically (Helms et al., 2011) and is particularly useful in framing an understanding of marital quality for spouses of Mexican origin who must navigate their relationships in the larger context of cultural adaptation. Helms et al. (2011) further underscored the marital implications of Mexican-origin women's experiences of acculturative stress as they adapt to life in the United States and proposes wives' marriage work as a potential moderator of the association between wives' stress and both spouses' marital quality. Accordingly, this model offers an orienting framework undergirding the examination of how wives' acculturative stress is linked to their own and their husbands' perceptions of marital satisfaction and negativity and how the relational process of wives' marriage work with friend and husband may play a role in understanding this link.

A risk and resilience theoretical framework offers further support for the study questions and the hypothesized direction of effects with its emphasis on the interaction between risk and protective influences on individual adjustment (Rutter, 2006). Risk factors are conditions that have demonstrated a higher probability of maladjustment, whereas protective factors are defined as conditions that protect against the negative effects of risk (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Applied to the current study, spouses' marital satisfaction and marital negativity (the outcomes of interest) are associated with the interplay between wives' acculturative stress (i.e., the risk factor) and wives' marriage work with husband and close friend (i.e., protective factors).

### **Review of the Literature**

As Mexican immigrant women adapt to life in the United States, they may experience acculturative stress which may, in turn, be linked to their own and their husband's perceptions of marital satisfaction and marital negativity. The process of cultural adaptation is defined as

attaining the knowledge, behavioral expectations, attitudes, and values associated with the host culture and the ethnic culture (Phinney, 1990). Acculturative stress can occur as immigrants struggle with Anglo versus Mexican cultural inconsistencies and pressures to conform to the dominant culture's prescribed expectations (Rodriguez et al., 2002). Previous research has documented the negative effects of acculturative stress on individual outcomes for women, such as depression and psychological well-being (Cervantes et al., 1991; Landale, 1997; Rodriguez et al., 2002) as well as wives' marital negativity and satisfaction (Helms et al., 2014).

Socioecological approaches to understanding marriage among immigrants suggest that the link between wives' acculturative stress and spouses' perceptions of marital satisfaction and marital negativity may be attenuated or magnified under certain relational conditions (Helms et al., 2011; Huston, 2000). Identified in prior research is a relational process labeled "marriage work" in which wives discussed marital concerns with their close friends or husbands (Helms et al., 2003; Oliner, 1989; Proulx et al., 2004). The term *marriage work* was derived from Oliner's (1989) in-depth interviews with 17 working- and middle-class wives and three divorced women to describe women's active involvement in one another's marriages through regular disclosure about marital concerns. Oliner specifically defined this process as "reflection or action to achieve or sustain the stability of a marriage and the sense of its adequacy" (p. 123), and argued that marriage work with friends has the potential to serve as an important protection against the typical stressors encountered by wives in their everyday lives. The important role that strong social ties play in the protection of individual health and well-being for members of poor Mexican communities has been demonstrated (Vega, 1990; Velez-Ibanez, 1996). Although proposed repeatedly, to date, neither the link between more broadly defined forms of social support and marital quality has been studied, nor has marriage work, specifically, been examined among Mexican-origin couples.

Although Oliner's (1989) original study focused solely on wives' marriage work with their close friends, recent studies with working- and middle-class samples of predominantly White married women suggest that wives also engage in marriage work with their husbands. Wives' marriage work with both friends and husbands has been linked to wives' perceptions of marital satisfaction (Helms et al., 2003; Julien et al., 2000; Proulx et al., 2004). Notably, marriage work that occurs in the marital dyad is conceptually distinct from, and statistically unrelated to, marital conflict and the negativity associated with marital "start-up" which emphasizes "how" discussions about marital concerns are introduced within marriage (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Helms et al., 2003; Proulx et al., 2004). Missing from this body of work on marriage work with friends and husbands, however, is an empirical test of the moderating influence of wives' marriage work as a protection of both husbands' and wives' marital quality against potentially threatening contextual stressors. Being able to discuss marital concerns with a close friend or husband is likely to be particularly important for Mexican-origin wives' marital quality in the context of stressors associated with immigration that wives experience. Moreover, the stressors associated with cultural adaptation create a context in which wives often rely on husbands as a source for discussing marital concerns more so than their counterparts in Mexico, who rely more heavily on female kin and friends for such discussions (Bender et al., 1999). Thus, it is likely that the link between wives' acculturative stress and wives' marital quality is moderated by the extent to which wives are able to discuss marital concerns with their close friends and husbands. Furthermore, to the extent that wives' marriage work with their husbands

and close friends helps alleviate stress for wives, husbands' marital satisfaction may also be buffered from the transmission of wives' acculturative stress to the marriage.

## **The Present Study**

The goal of this study was to examine the links between Mexican-origin wives' acculturative stress and their own and their husbands' reports of marital satisfaction and marital negativity as moderated by wives' marriage work with husband and marriage work with friend. We controlled for dispositional and structural factors that may account for this link (i.e., legal marital status, age of firstborn child, spouses' depressive symptoms, and birth country). Specifically, the link between wives' acculturative stress and their own and their husbands' marital satisfaction and negativity was expected to be attenuated under conditions of high marriage work with husband or high marriage work with friend. That is, it was expected that the hypothesized negative association between wives' acculturative stress on spouses' marital satisfaction would exist under conditions of wives' lower marriage work with husband or friend and be lessened or attenuated when wives engaged in higher levels of marriage work with their husbands or close friends. In addition, the link between wives' acculturative stress and spouses' marital negativity was hypothesized to be positive under conditions of low marriage work with husband or friend and attenuated or lessened under conditions of high marriage work.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data were collected in 2007-2008 as part of a larger study of contextual stress and marriage in Mexican-origin families during the advent of the U.S. Great Recession. Study participants were 120 couples of Mexican-origin with young children residing in North Carolina—a relatively new settlement location that continues to grow at over twice the average rate for the nation and traditional settlement states (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). To be eligible spouses had to be legally married or “living as married” in consensual unions, biological parents of their children, and living in the same household. In addition, at least one spouse had to be of Mexican descent, and both spouses had to be of Latin American origin. In 89% of couples, both spouses were born in Mexico. The majority (i.e., 97%) of spouses were first-generation immigrants. Because “common law” marriages in Mexico are often recognized as marital unions publicly, and because legal marriage in the United States is not possible for non-U.S. citizens, we followed recommendations (De Vos, 1999; Helms et al., 2011; Wheeler et al., 2010) to include couples who self-identified as “living together as married” in consensual unions.

Of the 120 participating couples, 83 (69%) were legally married and 37 (31%) were living as married in consensual unions. Husbands and wives on average were 30 and 28 years old, respectively, and couples had been married/living as married for an average of 7 years. Couples averaged two children with firstborn children averaging 6 years old. Thirty-seven percent of couples housed additional adults in their home with most reporting one or two additional household members. Wives and husbands averaged 10 and 9 years of formal schooling, respectively. On average, husbands had lived in the United States for 11 years, whereas wives' average length of time in the United States was 8 years. Ninety-eight percent of husbands were

employed and 54% of wives were employed; family income averaged \$33,297. No differences emerged for the legally married versus consensual union couples on family income, husbands' and wives' education levels, or the number of years husbands had lived in the United States. Significant differences were found, however, for family size, spouses' ages, wives' years in the United States, and the age of firstborn children. Compared with legally married couples, spouses in consensual unions had smaller family sizes, were younger, had younger firstborn children, and women had been living in the United States fewer years.

Participating couples resided in small towns (55%), cities (26%), and rural areas (19%). Census track data from 2008 were used to provide objective indicators of the neighborhoods in which participating couples resided. Ninety-five percent of couples lived in neighborhoods characterized by high poverty (i.e., ranging from a poverty rate of 19% to 32%). Nearly half of participating couples (49%) lived in neighborhoods classified as 50% Hispanic. Twenty-nine percent of couples lived in neighborhoods ranging from 10% to 25% Hispanic, and 21% resided in neighborhoods classified as less than 10% Hispanic.

### Procedures

Participants were recruited via cultural insiders and snowball sampling methods within predetermined census track locations identified for relatively high concentrations of Latino family households in several central North Carolina counties. Initial contacts with couples were done in-person by Latina project staff and social service workers either in couples' homes or at social service agencies that serve the Latino community. During initial contacts, the goals of the project were described, eligibility criteria were reviewed, and details regarding the nature of the interview were provided. Interested couples were given a flyer that included contact numbers to call. All eligible couples who expressed interest in the study were interviewed with the exception of one couple who withdrew prior to interviewing.

During 2- to 3-hour home interviews conducted by bilingual, Latina interviewers, spouses described their background and completed measures of individual well-being and marital quality. In addition, wives completed measures of acculturative stress and marriage work with friend and spouse. Respondents had the option of being interviewed in Spanish or English; all but one interview was conducted in Spanish. Interviewers read each survey question and response set aloud to reduce concerns due to variations in literacy. Wives and husbands were interviewed separately. Couples received a \$50 gift card for their participation.

### Measures

All measures utilized in the current study had been used in prior work with Latino populations and were available in both Spanish and English. In addition, two professional translators affiliated with the Center for New North Carolinians familiar with the local Spanish dialect reviewed all measures to ensure that they were appropriate for use with the current sample. Because the study of marital quality and marriage work among Mexican-origin couples is in its infancy, the measurement properties of these surveys have not been extensively examined. Thus, for measures of marital quality and marriage work, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using Amos 18 to validate the use of these measures for the current investigation.

Because marital quality was reported by both spouses, the CFAs for these measures were conducted separately by each respondent (i.e., husband and wife). For each analysis, we used a two-step procedure to assess model fit. First, in CFA, model fit is best evaluated by examining the chi-square statistic. A nonsignificant chi-square indicates that the hypothesized model is a good fit with the data. On obtaining a nonsignificant chi-square, we followed a secondary step in establishing validity and scrutinized the standardized factor loadings to ensure that survey items demonstrated statistically significant and reasonable in magnitude loadings (i.e., value  $>.35$ ; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) onto the appropriate marital latent factor. Bivariate correlations, descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha for all study variables are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among the Study Variables ( $N = 120$ ).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Marital Status <sup>a</sup>	—												
2. Age of Firstborn	.23*	—											
3. Wives' Depressive Symptoms	-.18 <sup>†</sup>	.06	—										
4. Husbands' Depressive Symptoms	.02	-.13	.10	—									
5. Wives' Birth Country <sup>b</sup>	-.05	.13	.05	-.03	—								
6. Husbands' Birth Country <sup>b</sup>	-.12	.12	.03	.15 <sup>†</sup>	.19*	—							
7. Wives' Acculturative Stress	-.26**	-.10	.27**	.11	.05	.11	—						
8. Wives' Marital Satisfaction	.23**	.05	-.36***	.00	.00	.02	-.17 <sup>†</sup>	—					
9. Wives' Marital Negativity	-.28**	-.16 <sup>†</sup>	.39***	.17 <sup>†</sup>	-.05	-.03	.18*	-.31**	—				
10. Husbands' Marital Satisfaction	.06	.10	-.11	-.07	.03	-.05	.02	.20*	-.05	—			
11. Husbands' Marital Negativity	.03	-.11	.10	.27**	-.22*	-.11	-.03	-.21*	.34***	-.27**	—		
12. Wives' Marriage Work with Husband	.14	.01	-.21*	.10	.08	.14	.06	.65**	-.12	.21*	-.25**	—	
13. Wives' Marriage Work with Friend	-.08	.05	-.01	-.05	-.02	.01	.12	.23*	.16 <sup>†</sup>	.06	-.05	.41***	—
<i>M</i>	—	6.19	14.25	14.27	—	—	1.53	7.18	3.74	7.57	3.05	6.82	6.41
<i>SD</i>	—	3.83	4.20	3.95	—	—	1.03	1.35	1.81	.98	1.50	1.35	1.56
$\alpha$	—	—	.81	.76	—	—	.85	.94	.72	.90	.59	.93	.95

a. Coded as 0 = not legally married (consensual union), 1 = legally married.

b. Coded as 0 = born in the United States, 1 = born in Mexico or other Latin American country.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Wives' Acculturative Stress.* The seven-item Pressure to Acculturate subscale of the Multidimensional Acculturative Stress Inventory (Rodriguez et al., 2002), a preferred measure of stress associated with cultural adaptation used by contemporary scholars who study Mexican American parents (e.g., Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Gonzales-Backen, 2011; White, Roosa, Weaver, & Nair, 2009), was used to assess wives' perceptions of acculturative stress. More specifically, this subscale assessed stress associated with the pressure to change one's core values, beliefs, and attitudes (e.g., "It bothers me when people pressure me to assimilate to the American way of doing things"). For each item of the Pressure to Acculturate subscale, respondents used a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 5 to indicate their perceptions of stress severity. Scores for the measure were determined by averaging wives' responses across the seven items; higher scores indicated higher levels of stress.

*Spouses' Marital Negativity.* Three items from the original five-item marital negativity subscale of Braiker and Kelley's (1979) Relationship Questionnaire were used in the current study. When completing the scale, spouses were asked to think about the past year and use a scale ranging from 1 to 9. Responses were averaged to create the scale score, and higher scores indicated greater levels of negativity. Although prior principal components and exploratory factor analysis

results provided preliminary support for the internal consistency of the full 5-item negativity scale in a sample of Mexican American husbands and wives (Wheeler et al., 2010), the results of the CFAs for the current study suggested the exclusion of two of the five original items due to low magnitude in their factor loadings. More specifically, we initially obtained a nonsignificant chi-square value for the full five-item measure for both husbands ( $\chi^2 = 2.25, df = 5, p = .82$ ) and wives ( $\chi^2 = 3.2598, df = 5, p = .55$ ) indicating this factor structure demonstrated a good fit to the data. Of concern, however, was the item “To what extent do you try to change things about your spouse that bother you,” which had low standardized factors loadings for both husbands and wives ( $<.35$ ) and the item “To what extent do you communicate negative feelings toward your spouse,” which had a low and nonsignificant loading in models involving data on wives. Accordingly, in the final measurement construction, these two items were omitted when creating summary scores of marital negativity for both wife and husband reports. The resulting three-item measure assessed spouses’ perceptions of negativity in the marriage (i.e., “How often do you and your husband/wife argue with one another?”; “How often do you feel angry or resentful toward your husband/wife?”; “When you argue, how serious are the arguments?”).

*Spouses’ Marital Satisfaction.* To assess marital satisfaction, spouses completed a 16-item modified version of the Domains of Satisfaction Scale initially developed by Huston, McHale, and Crouter (1986) and adapted for use with Mexican Americans by Updegraff and her colleagues (e.g., Updegraff, Crouter, Umaña-Taylor, & Cansler, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2010). Respondents were asked to think about the past year and use a scale ranging from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 9 (*extremely satisfied*) when answering the items. The 16 items were developed to assess spouses’ satisfaction with general domains of marriage (e.g., marital communication, the division of child care, the division of housework) as well as their satisfaction with domains of marriage identified as uniquely valued for Latino couples (e.g., interaction with relatives and spousal support for Mexican culture/traditions). An exploratory factor analysis conducted by Wheeler et al. (2010) supported a single-factor solution for both wives’ and husbands’ reports of marital satisfaction and was further supported via the CFAs conducted in the current study. Because the marital satisfaction items in these data were multivariate nonnormal (due to skew), the Bollen–Stine (B-S) bootstrapped chi-square was calculated to evaluate fit for the indicators of marital satisfaction. Nonsignificant B-S bootstrapped chi-square values in the final models for both husbands ( $\chi^2 = 144.24, df = 99, B-S \chi^2 p = .35$ ) and wives ( $\chi^2 = 197.94, df = 100, B-S \chi^2 p = .18$ ) demonstrated an adequate fit for the unidimensional models. Moreover, all standardized factor loadings were statistically significant and greater than .35. Responses were averaged across the 16 items to create the scale score, and higher scores on the scale indicated higher levels of marital satisfaction.

*Wives’ Marriage Work With Husband and Friend.* To assess marriage work with husband and friend, wives completed a 16-item scale adapted from Helms et al.’s (2003) 10-item measure of marriage work for each referent at different points in the interview. The scale was expanded for the current study to include the additional six domains of marriage unique to Mexican-origin couples that were assessed in the adapted measure of marital satisfaction. The scale assesses the extent to which wives discussed marital concerns with their husbands and close friends across 16 domains of marriage. Wives completed two parallel sets of items at different points in the interview, with a referent of spouse for marital assessments and the identified close friend for assessments of marriage work with friend. The 16 items reflected a variety of domains of



marriage and included items such as “How often do you bring up concerns about how well you and your husband talk over important and unimportant issues?” and “How often do you bring up concerns about your husband’s participation in Mexican cultural celebrations and traditions?” Wives were asked to think about the past year and use a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 9 (*very often*) to indicate how often they had brought up marital concerns and talked about them with their husband or close friend when problems arose in each of the 16 marital domains. Responses were averaged to create the scale score, and higher scores on the scale indicated higher levels of marital satisfaction. Scores for each measure of marriage work were created by averaging items; higher scores indicated higher levels of marriage work. CFA results using the B-S bootstrapped chi-square (due to nonnormality in the items) indicated support for a one-factor model for the adapted 16-item version of the marriage work scale used in this study for both wives’ marriage work with husband ( $\chi^2 = 188.72$ ,  $df = 98$ , B-S  $\chi^2 p = .09$ ) and wives’ marriage work with friend ( $\chi^2 = 191.03$ ,  $df = 97$ , B-S  $\chi^2 p = .19$ ). In addition to acceptable model fit statistics, all items demonstrated statistically significant factor loadings  $>.35$ —a finding consistent with support found for a one-factor model in earlier work with White working- and middle-class couples (Helms et al., 2003).

*Spouses’ Depressive Symptoms.* A nine-item form of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Helms et al., 2014; Radloff, 1977) was used to assess husbands’ and wives’ depressive symptoms and served as a control variable in the analyses. The reliability and validity of the measure is well-documented, including internal consistency, factor structure, test-retest, convergent and discriminant validity. In addition, the Spanish version of the CES-D has been used with Mexican American samples in both nationally representative (Moscicki, Locke, Rae, & Boyd, 1989) and ethnic-homogeneous studies (e.g., Roosa, Reinholtz, & Angelini, 1999). Respondents were asked to think about the past month and use a scale ranging from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most of the time*). The 9-item CES-D items assessed cognitive, affective, and behavioral symptoms associated with depression (e.g., “I could not get going” and “I felt sad”). Scores for the measure were created by summing across the nine items with a higher score indicating a greater frequency/presence of depressive symptoms.

*Demographic Information.* Wives’ reports of age of firstborn child (measured continuously and ranging from less than 1 year to 13 years old), legal marital status (coded 0 = “living as married,” 1 = legally married), and spouses’ reports of birth country (coded 0 = United States, 1 = Mexico or other Latin American country) were treated as additional control variables given theoretical and empirical links between these factors and marital quality in past work.

## **Results**

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine bivariate associations between the study variables, mean differences in spouses’ reports of marital satisfaction and negativity, and mean differences in wives’ reports of marriage work with friend and husband. Bivariate Pearson correlations and descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 1. Similar to what has been found in earlier work with Mexican immigrants (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2002), mean values for wives’ reports of acculturative stress were relatively low. On average, spouses’ reports of depressive symptoms and marital negativity were low, reports of marital satisfaction

were relatively high, and wives' reports of marriage work with friend and husbands were moderate.

At the bivariate level, marital status (i.e., living as married vs. legally married) was positively associated with wives' marital satisfaction and age of firstborn child and negatively associated with wives' pressure to acculturate and wives' marital negativity. Overall, wives who were in consensual unions (i.e., not legally married) had younger children and reported higher levels of acculturative stress and marital negativity and lower levels of marital satisfaction than legally married wives. These significant associations provide further support for including marital status as a control variable. Wives' depressive symptoms, another control variable in the substantive analyses, were positively correlated with wives' pressure to acculturate and wives' marital negativity, and negatively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction and marriage work with husband. Husbands' depressive symptoms were correlated with husbands' marital negativity only; the association was positive. Husbands' marital negativity was significantly related to wives' birth country and suggested that husbands married to wives who were born in the United States ( $n = 4$  couples) reported higher levels of marital negativity than husbands married to wives born in Mexico. One significant bivariate association between the independent and dependent variables in the study were found; wives' acculturative stress was positively associated with wives' marital negativity. Several significant associations were found between the dependent and moderator variables. Both husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction was positively associated with wives' marriage work with spouse, and husbands' marital negativity was negatively related to wives' marriage work with spouse. Wives' marriage work with friend was positively associated with wives' marital satisfaction at the bivariate level. A within-couple positive association was found for husbands' and wives' marital negativity. Negative within-spouse associations between marital negativity and satisfaction were found for both husbands and wives. Finally, a significant positive association was found between the moderator variables, wives' marriage work with friend and wives' marriage work with spouse suggesting that wives who engaged in more marriage work with their friends were also likely to engage in more marriage work with their husbands.

A series of  $t$  tests for dependent samples were conducted to examine differences between wives' and husbands' reports of marital satisfaction and marital negativity as well as differences in wives' reports of marriage work with husband and friend (see Table 1). First, there was a significant difference in wives' and husbands' reports of marital satisfaction,  $t(108) = -2.66, p < .01$ . Husbands reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than wives. Second, there was a significant difference in wives' and husbands' reports of marital negativity,  $t(109) = 6.28, p < .001$ . Wives reported higher levels of marital negativity than husbands. Third, the extent to which wives engaged in marriage work with their husbands and their close friends differed,  $t(108) = 2.61, p < .01$ . Wives were more likely to engage in marriage work with husbands than they were with close friends.

### **Wives' Acculturative Stress, Marriage Work, and Spouses' Marital Quality**

The proposed research questions were addressed in a series of four multiple regression analyses conducted separately for each indicator of marital quality for each spouse and are presented in Table 2. In each analysis, covariates appear first (i.e., legal marriage status, age of firstborn,

spouses' depressive symptoms, spouses' birth country), followed by the independent variable of wives' acculturative stress, the marriage work moderators, and the interactions between wives' acculturative stress and the two indicators of wives' marriage work. For interaction terms, continuous predictor variables were centered (i.e., the item mean was subtracted from each variable) to reduce multicollinearity, and significant interactions were interpreted via guidelines provided by Aiken and West (1991).

**Table 2.** Regression Coefficients for Models Predicting Wives' and Husbands' Marital Satisfaction and Marital Negativity ( $N = 120$ ).

Variable	Marital satisfaction						Marital negativity					
	Wives			Husbands			Wives			Husbands		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
1. Marital Status	.15	.22	.05	-.12	.21	-.06	-.71	.36	-.18 <sup>†</sup>	.32	.31	.10
2. Age of Firstborn	.01	.02	.04	.03	.02	.11	-.06	.04	-.12	-.03	.03	-.07
3. Wives' Depressive Symptoms	-.05	.02	-.17*	-.01	.02	-.06	.14	.04	.33***	.01	.03	.03
4. Husbands' Depressive Symptoms	-.01	.02	-.03	.00	.02	-.02	.08	.04	.18*	.11	.03	.28**
5. Wives' Birth Country	-.21	.46	-.03	.12	.45	.02	-.29	.77	-.03	-1.24	.65	-.17 <sup>†</sup>
6. Husbands' Birth Country	-.23	.52	-.03	-.52	.58	-.09	-.50	.88	-.05	-.53	.75	-.06
7. Wives' Acculturative Stress	-.16	.10	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.02	.09	.02	-.02	.16	.01	-.04	.14	-.03
8. Wives' Marriage Work with Husband	.67	.08	.67***	.22	.08	.30*	-.14	.14	-.10	-.41	.12	-.36**
9. Wives' Marriage Work with Friend	-.06	.07	-.07	-.04	.07	-.07	.26	.12	.23*	.14	.10	.14
10. Wives' Acculturative Stress × Marriage Work with Husbands	.10	.09	.10	.19	.09	.26*	.07	.15	.05	-.23	.13	-.20*
11. Wives' Acculturative Stress × Marriage Work with Friends	-.14	.08	-.16 <sup>†</sup>	-.01	.08	-.02	.08	.13	.07	.10	.11	.10
$R^2$	.52***			.13*			.28***			.23**		

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

For the model predicting wives' marital satisfaction (Table 2, column 1), neither marriage work with husband nor marriage work with friend significantly moderated the association between wives' acculturative stress and their own reports of marital satisfaction. Thus, contrary to the hypothesis, no support was found for moderation in the model predicting wives' marital satisfaction. Findings did show a significant negative relationship between wives' reported depressive symptoms and wives' marital satisfaction. Although wives' marriage work with husband did not moderate the proposed acculturative stress–marital satisfaction link, it was a significant predictor of wives' marital satisfaction. This finding suggested that the more marriage work with husbands wives reported, the more satisfied they were with the marriage.

Similarly, the hypothesis that wives' marriage work would moderate the association of wives' acculturative stress and wives' reports of marital negativity was not supported. (See the third column of Table 2.) Wives' depressive symptoms, husbands' depressive symptoms, and wives' reports of marriage work with friend emerged as significant predictors of wives' marital negativity, however. Both wives' and husbands' depressive symptoms were positively associated with wives' marital negativity suggesting that the more depressed wives and husbands were, the more marital negativity wives reported. Finally, marriage work with friend was positively associated with wives' marital negativity suggesting that wives were more likely to discuss marital concerns with their close friend when they perceived higher levels of negativity in their marriage.

In the models predicting husbands' marital satisfaction and husbands' marital negativity (columns 2 and 4 of Table 2), we found both a main effect for wives' marriage work with spouse

and an interaction between wives' marriage work with spouse and wives' acculturative stress, providing partial support for the study's hypotheses. (Note that no support was found for the moderating effect of wives' marriage work with friends in these models.) First, regarding husbands' marital satisfaction, a positive association between wives' marriage work with husband and husbands' marital satisfaction indicated that the more wives engaged in marriage work with their husbands, the more marital satisfaction husbands reported. Similarly, in the model predicting husbands' marital negativity, the significant negative main effect for wives' marriage work with spouse suggested that the more marriage work with husbands wives reported, the less marital negativity husbands perceived. Husbands' depressive symptoms were also found to be positively associated with their reports of marital negativity (but not reports of marital satisfaction.) The main effects of wives' marriage work with husbands found in these models were further qualified by significant interactions. As hypothesized, the significant interaction between wives' acculturative stress and marriage work with husband in both models demonstrated that wives' acculturative stress was linked with husbands' satisfaction and negativity at different levels of wives' marriage work with husband.

To further explain the interactions, husbands' reports of marital satisfaction and negativity were regressed onto wives' reports of acculturative stress at high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) and low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) levels of wives' marriage work with husband. The examination of simple slopes for husbands' marital satisfaction revealed that for couples in which wives engaged in low levels of marriage work with their husbands, wives' acculturative stress was negatively ( $\beta = -.63$ ) related to their husbands' reports of marital satisfaction. In short, when wives reported low levels of marriage work with their husbands, the more acculturative stress wives perceived, the less satisfied their husbands were with their marriages. In contrast, in marriages where wives engaged in high levels of marriage work with their husbands, the association between wives' acculturative stress and husbands' marital satisfaction was not significant ( $\beta = .16$ ). Aligning with our hypothesis, this finding indicates that the negative association of wives' acculturative stress with husbands' marital satisfaction found under conditions of low marriage work with husband was attenuated in marriages in which wives reported high levels of marriage work with their husbands.

A similar pattern of results was found for the model predicting husbands' marital negativity. The examination of simple slopes revealed that for couples in which wives engaged in low levels of marriage work with their husbands, wives' acculturative stress was positively ( $\beta = .60$ ) linked to husbands' reports of marital negativity. In contrast, in marriages where wives reported high levels of marriage work with husbands, the association between wives' acculturative stress was negatively ( $\beta = -.33$ ) linked to husbands' marital negativity. This finding indicated that the positive association between wives' acculturative stress and husbands' marital negativity found under conditions of low marriage work with husband was reversed in marriages in which wives reported high levels of marriage work with their husbands. As hypothesized, in marriages in which wives talked to their husbands about marital concerns at low levels, the more acculturative stress wives reported, the more marital negativity husbands reported. However, in marital contexts in which wives discussed marital concerns with their husbands at high levels, the more stress wives reported, the less marital negativity husbands reported.

## **Discussion**

Informed by socioecological models of marriage (Helms et al., 2011; Huston, 2000) and a risk and resilience framework (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 2006), this study explored both links between Mexican-origin wives' acculturative stress and their own and their husbands' reports of marital quality as moderated by wives' marriage work with their husband and close friend. The hypothesis that wives' marriage work with husbands and close friends would moderate the link between wives' acculturative stress and spouses' marital quality was partially supported. More specifically, wives' marriage work with husband moderated the association between wives' acculturative stress and husbands' marital satisfaction and marital negativity. Wives' marriage work with friend did not emerge as a significant moderator, but was related positively to wives' marital negativity as a main effect. Similarly, a main effect was found linking wives' marriage work with husband and wives' marital satisfaction.

### Wives' Marriage Work With Husbands Versus Friends

Preliminary analyses revealed that wives were more likely to engage in marriage work with their husbands than marriage work with their close friends. This finding contrasts with prior work with primarily White working- and middle-class women showing that wives engaged in more marriage work with their close friends than husbands (Helms et al., 2003; Oliner, 1989). The current finding is notable in that it challenges earlier speculations that marriage work with friends may be normative and thus occur more frequently than marriage work with husbands in cultural groups that emphasize connections with kin and friends outside the marriage (Proulx et al., 2004) and offers further support for earlier works suggesting that reliance on husbands in this way may be particularly adaptive for Mexican-origin women living in emerging immigrant communities who may be geographically dislocated from close female kin and friends (Bender et al., 1999; Helms et al., 2011).

### Wives' Marital Quality

For the model predicting wives' marital satisfaction, neither marriage work with husband nor marriage work with friend moderated the association between wives' acculturative stress and their own reports of marital satisfaction. However, wives' acculturative stress was related at a trend level with wives' reports of marital satisfaction in the expected direction. That is, the more stress experienced by wives, the less marital satisfaction they reported. Moreover, wives' marriage work with husband was a significant predictor of wives' marital satisfaction suggesting that higher levels of marriage work with husbands was associated with greater marital satisfaction for wives. The nature of the data does not make it possible to tease apart the direction of effects in this association. A possible explanation for these findings is that higher levels of marriage work with husbands lead wives to feel more satisfied in their marriage. Alternatively, satisfied wives may simply communicate more with their husbands than unsatisfied wives. Although the hypothesized protective effect of wives' marriage work was not supported, the main effect finding for wives' marriage work with husbands aligns with previous work showing that actively seeking out husbands to discuss marital concerns is linked with positive dimensions of marital quality (Helms et al., 2003; Lee, 1988; Proulx et al., 2004). Moreover, this finding is consistent with several studies of social support among Mexican-origin mothers, which emphasized the importance of wives being able to discuss a variety of family concerns with their

husbands in the context of immigration in a manner that they may have not found necessary or desirable in Mexico (Bender et al., 1999; Parrado & Flippen, 2005).

For the model predicting wives' marital negativity, the hypothesis that wives' marriage work would moderate the association of wives' acculturative stress and wives' marital quality was not supported. It should be noted that marriage work with husband was not associated with wives' reports of marital negativity. This nonsignificant finding offers additional support that marriage work is conceptually distinct from marital negativity and is consistent with prior research (e.g., Helms et al., 2003; Proulx et al., 2004). In contrast, marriage work with friend was positively associated with wives' marital negativity suggesting that the more wives engaged in marriage work with their close friends, the more negativity they perceived in their marital interactions. This finding was consistent with Helms et al. (2003), which found that wives' marriage work with friends was positively related to wives' reports of ineffective arguing in the marital dyad. Because the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow a determination of the direction of effects in the association between marriage work with friend and wives' marital negativity, it could be that talking with friends leads wives to perceive more marital negativity, or that wives bring up their marital concerns to their close friends (rather than to their husbands) in marriages that are characterized by negativity.

Taken together, the pattern of findings for wives' marital quality challenges the assertion that wives' marriage work with friend and marriage work with husband protects wives' marital quality in the context of contextual stressors associated with adaptation. Notably, wives' acculturative stress was related to marital satisfaction at a trend level only and was unrelated to wives' reports of negativity in the marriage, and wives' marriage work did not moderate either association. Instead, wives' depressive symptoms predicted both wives' marital satisfaction and negativity, whereas wives' marriage work with spouse was significantly linked to wives' marital satisfaction only, and wives' marriage work with friend was linked to wives' marital negativity.

### Husbands' Marital Quality

In support of the study hypotheses, a significant interaction between wives' acculturative stress and marriage work with husband emerged suggesting that wives' acculturative stress was linked with husbands' marital satisfaction at different levels of wives' marriage work with husband. Specifically, when wives engaged in low levels of marriage work with their husbands, wives' acculturative stress was negatively related to husbands' reports of marital satisfaction. However, in marriages in which wives engaged in high levels of marriage work with their husbands, wives' acculturative stress and husbands' marital satisfaction were unrelated. These findings are consistent with a risk and resilience framework in that higher levels of marriage work with husbands served as a protective factor that attenuated the negative effects of risk (i.e., wives' acculturative stress) on husbands' marital satisfaction found under conditions of lower levels of marriage work with husbands. That is, wives' marriage work with husbands acted as a protection against the potential contagion of wives' acculturative stress to husbands' marital satisfaction.

Additional support for the moderating role of wives' marriage work with husband was found for the model predicting husbands' marital negativity. Specifically, wives' acculturative stress was linked with husbands' marital negativity at different levels of wives' marriage work with

husbands. That is, for couples in which wives reported lower levels of marriage work with husbands, the more acculturative stress wives perceived, the more negativity husbands reported. However, in marriages where wives reported higher levels of marriage work with husbands, the association between wives' acculturative stress and husbands' marital negativity was reversed. That is, the more stress wives perceived, the less negativity husbands reported in the marriage. This negative association between wives' acculturative stress and husbands' marital negativity under conditions of higher levels of marriage work with husbands was not anticipated. It may be that when wives talk openly with their husbands about concerns specific to marriage, the stress wives experience related to cultural adaptation is less likely to be misconstrued by husbands as negativity about the marriage. More specifically, it may be that immigrant wives' experiences of acculturative stress are associated with fewer negative marital interactions (as perceived by husbands) in marriages where wives communicate openly about concerns specific to marriage.

Overall, the significant interactions found in the models predicting husbands' perceptions of marital quality qualified the lower order main effects of wives' marriage work with spouse and offer support for the study's hypotheses. Although the protective function of wives' marriage work with friends was not supported for the link between wives' acculturative stress and husbands' marital quality, wives' marriage work with husbands did moderate this link for both husbands' marital satisfaction and negativity. These findings are important because they are the first to demonstrate the possible moderating role of wives' marriage work with husbands in models examining the transmission of wives' stress to husbands' marital quality—an association that is theoretically supported by socioecological and dyadic frameworks for understanding marriage but, until now, was untested (Helms et al., 2011; Neff & Karney, 2007).

### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Despite scholars' repeated advocacy for greater attention to the marital experiences of understudied populations (Garcia Coll, 2005; Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004; Kazak, 2004; Parke, 1998), fewer than 1% of publications in the leading psychology, marital, and family journals have examined marriage among Latino couples in the past several decades (Helms, 2013; Vega & Lopez, 2001). Instead, most studies of Latinos focus on individual responses to stressors associated with migration and adaptation (Landale, 1997) with results indicating significant direct effects between acculturative stress and individual well-being (Cervantes et al., 1991; Rodriguez et al., 2002). Essentially no empirical attention has been given to the links between stress related to cultural adaptation and marital quality or to potential moderators that may attenuate or amplify the effects of acculturative stress on marriage for Mexican-origin couples. The present study represents an important first step in addressing this gap in that it tested a theoretically informed set of research questions that attended to culturally relevant dimensions of context and wives' behavior in their close relationships (i.e., marriage work with husbands and close friends) to better understand the link between wives' acculturative stress and spouses' marital quality in families of Mexican origin—a group understudied by marital researchers who represent the largest and most rapidly growing ethnic minority group in the United States.

Although this study addresses concerns voiced by scholars for decades regarding the need to study the marital experiences of immigrants (Glick, 2010) and Latinos, more specifically (Helms

et al., 2011), it is important to note that the study sample represents a unique group of Latinos in an emerging immigrant section of the country. The findings are therefore not generalizable to all Mexican Americans or immigrant couples more broadly. In addition, for the models predicting wives' marital quality, all data were provided by wives' self-report and, thus, the findings may be an artifact of shared-method variance. Future research should consider other methods for assessing contextual stress including objective ratings of spouses' self-reported stressors (e.g., Almeida, 2005). Regarding the measure of marriage work, this study did not assess *how* wives brought up their marital concerns to husbands, which has been of interest to researchers who study conflict and communication patterns in marriage. Future research may benefit from observational studies of marriage work to better explicate the construct and its links with marital quality (e.g., Julien et al., 2000). Finally, it is recommended that future researchers examine how a variety of contextual stressors as reported by both spouses, marriage work with husbands, and marriage work with friends interact to affect spouses' marital quality. We were unable to test these associations given limited power in our sample of 120 couples. Testing more complex associations between a variety of indicators of stress associated with cultural adaptation and marriage work in dyadic models that also include process variables linking stress to spouses' marital quality would provide a better understanding of how husbands' and wives' stressors are linked with marital quality in marital contexts characterized by different levels of spouses' marriage work with one another and close friends.

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