

## Depressive symptoms in Latina mothers in an emerging immigrant community

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### Abstract:

**Objectives:** Latina mothers in emerging immigrant communities experience heightened risk for depressive symptoms because of the convergence of multiple risk factors rooted in economic, cultural, and familial experiences. Previous research with Latina/o adolescents has found that discrimination, and not acculturative stress, predicts depressive symptoms; however, no research to our knowledge has examined the relative impact of both discrimination and acculturative stress in Latina mothers. **Method:** The present study expands this literature by examining how both universal (i.e., economic hardship and parent–child conflict) and cultural stressors (i.e., discrimination and acculturative-based family conflict) predict maternal depressive symptoms in a sample of 169 Latina mothers in an emerging immigrant context. **Results:** Results found that the presence of universal stressors for Latina mothers does indeed significantly predict depressive symptoms, and that uniquely, 1 type of cultural stressor (i.e., acculturative-based family conflict) predicts depressive symptoms above and beyond the universal stressors. **Conclusions:** These findings indicate that it is important to examine how cultural stressors may have differential impact for youth and their parents; thus, more work should examine the impact of acculturative-based family conflict for Latina mothers.

**Keywords:** discrimination | Latina mothers | depressive symptoms | economic stress | acculturation-based conflict

### Article:

Maternal depressive symptoms serve as a significant risk factor for families, as these symptoms typically predict disruptions in parenting processes that ultimately affect child psychosocial outcomes (Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000). Indeed, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies employing the family stress model find that maternal depressive symptoms act as a mediating risk factor predicting child outcomes (Ponnet, 2014; White, Liu, Nair, & Tein,

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2015). Yet, most of this research has not considered the role of culturally based stressors as predictors of depressive symptoms in these models (see, Helms et al., 2014 for an example), and little research, more broadly, has investigated predictors of depressive symptoms among Latina/o parents (Valdez, Shewakramani, Goldberg, & Padilla, 2013). Much of this research has focused on understanding how universal stressors, such as perceived economic hardship and familial conflict, impact depressive symptoms for parents (Catalano, 2010; Planos, Zayas, & Busch-Rossnagel, 1997). The few studies examining cultural stressors indeed find that they play an important role, as past literature indicates that daily cultural stressors, including acculturation-based family conflict and discrimination, are significantly associated with depressive symptoms among Latina/o immigrant parents (Lorenzo-Blanco & Cortina, 2013; Ornelas & Perreira, 2011). Because of the impact that parental depression has on parenting processes (Aikens, Coleman, & Barbarin, 2008), it is important to understand the factors that may contribute to the development of depressive symptoms for Latina mothers, especially the role culturally based stressors may play in conjunction with other types of stress. Building on the family stress model (Conger, Rueter, & Conger, 2000), this study examined the relative impact of economic hardship, parent-child conflict, discrimination, and acculturation-based family conflict on Latina mothers' depressive symptoms.

## **Universal Stressors**

### **Economic Hardship**

Experiences of economic hardship have been hypothesized to play a central role in the prediction of depressive symptoms for parents across time (Conger et al., 2000, 2002; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). Perceptions of economic hardship occur when economic disadvantages influence emotions and behaviors (Conger et al., 2002; McLoyd, 1998). Economic hardship is highly prevalent in Latina/o emerging immigrant communities, as many Latina/o immigrants in these communities have lower levels of education, may be undocumented, and typically are employed in low-paying jobs (Stein, Gonzales, García Coll, & Prandoni, 2016). Additionally, to support their families, Latina/o parents are often required to work multiple jobs, contributing to familial stress, especially for Latina mothers who frequently serve as the primary caretaker of the children and family (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). Consistent with the family stress model, perceptions of economic hardship have been associated with greater levels of depressive symptoms in Latina/o samples, both in established immigrant communities, which historically consist of a significant Latina/o population (e.g., New Mexico, Texas), and in emerging immigrant communities, which are new destinations that often lack the social support and structural resources that more established immigrant communities boast (e.g., North Carolina, Alabama; Dennis, Parke, Coltrane, Blacher, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2003; Helms et al., 2014; Oropesa & Landale, 2004; White, Roosa, Weaver, & Nair, 2009).

### **Parent-Child Conflict**

Other research has established that familial conflict is also a relevant stressor that contributes to depressive symptomatology in Latina/o parents. The vast majority of this work has focused on marital conflict (i.e., Helms et al., 2014) and has documented that it uniquely contributes to maternal depressive symptoms. More limited work has focused on parent-child conflict as a

predictor of maternal depressive symptoms (Brennan, Le Brocque, & Hammen, 2003). However, given the central role of the family for Latina mothers and the importance of cultural values in dictating harmonious family relationships (i.e., familism, *simpatia*; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), more research on this topic is warranted. Parent–child conflict typically involves negative sentiment related to arguments about authority, responsibilities, and appropriate behavior (Moed et al., 2015; Smetana, 2011). Although the family stress model hypothesizes that parental depressive symptoms influence parenting processes, parent–child conflict may also contribute to parental depressive symptoms and can be considered to be a stressor within this model. In fact, past studies have shown that the stress that arises from parent–child conflict in the home is associated with greater maternal depression (Brennan et al., 2003).

## **Cultural Stressors**

### Foreigner-Based Discrimination

Latina/o immigrant families experience unique cultural stressors related to their cultural background and minority status, such as the experience of discrimination (Delgado, Updegraff, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2011). Foreigner-based discrimination (FBD) is defined as unfair or different treatment due to the presumption of being a foreigner (Armenta et al., 2013). Experiences of FBD are associated with poor psychological functioning for adult Latina/os (Delgado et al., 2011; Romero & Roberts, 2003; Szalacha et al., 2003). Yet, no studies to our knowledge have examined this specific form of discrimination for Latina/os, specifically with Latina mothers, and in conjunction with other types of universal and cultural stressors within an emerging immigrant community. Potentially, the impact of discrimination will be higher in these emerging immigrant communities given that they lack the language proficiency to advocate for themselves, and the social and political support that those in more established destinations count on (Stamps & Bohon, 2006), which has been supported by past sociological work that highlights the discrimination experienced by Latina/o adults in these communities (Marrow, 2011). The present study is innovative in that it examines the relative impact of FBD in predicting depressive symptoms for Latina parents, taking into account experiences of economic hardship and other types of parent–child conflict.

### Acculturation-Based Family Conflict

Latina/o families experience a unique type of family conflict that often results from a gap in acculturation between Latina/o adolescents and their parents (Szapocznik, & Kurtines, 1993). Specifically, the acculturation gap can best be defined as the difference between the adolescent's adherence with and engagement to both their native and U.S. culture norms and beliefs, and their parents' adherence with and engagement to both cultures (Goforth, Pham, & Oka, 2015). Furthermore, parents and children in Latina/o families experience acculturation differently and at different rates (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). For example, children in immigrant families go to school and are exposed to U.S. cultural norms most of the day, often learning about the U.S. culture, such as the English language and U.S. values and beliefs, more rapidly than their parents (Berry, 1998). The difference in acculturation between the parent and adolescent can cause conflict within the relationship (Tardif-Williams & Fisher, 2009), which may increase parenting stress, and thus, impact maternal depressive symptoms (Huang, Costeines, Ayala, & Kaufman,

2014). Moreover, literature with Latina/o adolescents suggests that acculturative stress contributes to depressive symptoms above and beyond the contribution of parent–child conflict (Huq, Stein, & Gonzalez, 2016). Although extant literature has established a clear connection between acculturative stress and depressive symptoms in Latina/os more broadly, this specific stressor in Latina/o parents has not been examined. Examining this relation is critical given that literature suggests different patterns of parent and child acculturation rates influence parent–child relationships, resulting in differential psychological effects for parents (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Much of the research on acculturation gaps focuses on child outcomes (see Telzer, 2010 for a review), and our study contributes to the literature in understanding its impact on mothers. Further, examining this relation in an emerging immigrant community is warranted given that studies have found differences in the experience of psychosocial stress between U.S. born and newly arrived Latina/os (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991). This study fills this gap in the literature by examining the unique association of acculturation-based family conflict and depressive symptoms for Latina immigrant mothers.

The current study extends past research on depressive symptoms in Latina mothers by testing the relative contribution of universal stressors (i.e., economic stress and parent–child conflict) to parse out how the unique cultural stressors (i.e., foreigner-based discrimination and acculturation-based family conflict) experienced by Latina immigrant mothers contribute to their depressive symptoms. We hypothesized that both culturally universal and culturally based stressors would predict depressive symptomatology in Latina mothers.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 169 Latina/o adolescents and their mothers, who were recruited from rosters from two different middle schools in semirural North Carolina (NC). The mothers' average age was 41 ( $SD = 5.79$ ), and the majority of the sample was born in Mexico (88.6%) and had lived an average of 15 years ( $SD = 4.56$ ) in the United States. The remainder of the sample was born in Central and South American countries, with less than 2% born in the United States. On the other hand, most of the adolescents were born in the United States (86%). The adolescents' average age was 12.86 (age range = 10.33–15.23 years). The sample was termed to be living in an emerging immigrant destination due to the large influx of Latina/o immigrants to the state between 1990 and 2000, during which the population grew 11-fold, in comparison to traditional destinations where Latino immigrants had longer histories of immigration and a larger portion of second and third generation families (i.e., California, Illinois, Texas; Stein et al., 2016). Further, NC has had an increase of both foreign-born and native-born Latina/os since that original influx of immigrants leading to the modal family in this state as being headed by recently arrived immigrant parents with native born children (as is evident in our sample). To be eligible for the study, the biological parents of the adolescent had to be Latina/o, the mother had to be the resident caregiver of the child, and the child had to be between 11 and 14 years old. This study was conducted under the oversight of the institutional review board of a large Southeastern public university.

### **Procedure**

This study was part of a larger project that examined culturally based risk and resilience processes in Latina/o mother–child dyads (see Stein, Gonzalez, Cupito, Kiang, & Supple, 2015). A team of research assistants called families from the contact list provided by the school to determine participant interest and eligibility. Families who were not reached by phone were contacted through door-to-door recruitment. Once families were enrolled to participate in the project, trained research assistants conducted in-home interviews with mothers and adolescents. A total of 175 families participated in the study from the 317 eligible families. Out of the 175 families, five mothers had missing data on some of the surveys and were dropped from the analyses, resulting in a sample of 169 mothers. Families were each given the choice of having the English or Spanish version of the questionnaire. Only one mother chose to take the English version of the survey. Measures that were not available in Spanish were translated and back-translated by bilingual, bicultural researchers, and the team resolved any discrepancies with a third bilingual, bicultural research assistant (Behling & Law, 2000). Trained bilingual research assistants conducted the interviews with mothers, and the interview questionnaires were counterbalanced. At the end of the study, the adolescent was provided with a \$10 gift card, and the mother was provided with a \$20 gift card for their participation.

## Measures

**Economic hardship.** Economic hardship was measured using the Psychological Sense of Economic Hardship Scale, which included questions assessing the degree of perceived hardship along the following three constructs: not enough money for necessities, inability to make ends meet, and financial strain (Barrera, Caples, & Tein, 2001). Sample items included questions about whether mothers felt they had enough money for housing, clothing, food, medical coverage, home furnishings, and leisure activities, difficulty in paying their bills, and anticipation of future hardships and reductions in family standard of living in the next 3 months. This scale demonstrated adequate reliability in this sample ( $\alpha = .66$ ). This measure was available in Spanish.

**Parent–child conflict.** The 3-item conflict subscale of the Network of Relationships Inventory–Relationship Qualities Version (Way & Chen, 2000) was used to assess maternal perception of universal parent–child conflict. Items assess the frequency of conflicts between parents and their children (e.g., “How often do you and your child disagree or quarrel with each other”) using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). This measure demonstrated adequate reliability ( $\alpha = .69$ ). This measure was translated for this project.

**Acculturation-based family conflict.** The Conflict over Preferred Culture subscale of the Acculturation Gap Conflict Inventory (Basáñez, Dennis, Crano, Stacy, & Unger, 2014) was used to measure the parental perception of conflict due to acculturation differences. Mothers were asked to respond to what degree they agreed with a series of nine statements on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Questions on this scale include, “I would like for him or her to be more traditional” and “I wish that he or she would practice the customs of our culture more”). This measure demonstrated adequate reliability in this sample ( $\alpha = .77$ ). This measure was available in Spanish.

**Discrimination.** Discrimination was measured using the Foreigner Objectification Scale (Armenta et al., 2013; Pituc, Jung, & Lee, 2009) on which mothers reported the frequency of discrimination experiences on a four-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*five or more times*). Questions on this scale include, “[Have you] had your American citizenship or residency questioned by others?” and “[Have you] had someone comment on or been surprised by your language ability?” (Armenta et al., 2013; Pituc et al., 2009). Reliability for this scale was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .79$ ) This measure was translated for the current project.

**Depressive symptoms.** Maternal depressive symptoms were measured using the Spanish version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; Ruiz-Grosso et al., 2012). The scale comprises 20 questions that are rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (*rarely or none of the time* [less than 1 day]) to 4 (*most or all of the time* [5 days to 7 days]). The items include, “I was bothered by things that usually don’t bother me” and “I felt that everything I did was an effort” (Radloff, 1977). This measure demonstrated satisfactory reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and was available in Spanish.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 169)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Depressive symptoms	12.33	.10	—				
2. Economic hardship	2.64	.68	.33**	—			
3. Parent-child conflict	2.45	.67	.29**	.04	—		
4. Discrimination	1.68	.71	.19*	.19*	.11	—	
5. Acculturation-based family conflict	3.05	1.34	.23**	-.03	.37**	.04	—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Maternal Depressive Symptoms (N = 169)

Variable	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> change
Step 1			.19	
Mother’s age	-.06	.14		
Years lived in United States	.05	.18		
Economic hardships	.33**	1.15		
Parent-child conflict	.27**	1.17		
Step 2			.22	.03
Mother’s age	-.07	.14		
Years lived in United States	-.05	.17		
Economic hardships	.32**	1.16		
Parent-child conflict	.20*	1.24		
Acculturation-based conflict	.16*	.62		
Discrimination	.08	1.10		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

## Results

Analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics for Windows (Version 24; IBM Corp, 2016). Means and correlations are presented in Table 1. We ran a two-step hierarchical regression model; the first step included the covariates (i.e., age, length of time in the United States) and universal stressors (i.e., economic hardship and parent-child conflict). In the second step, cultural stressors (i.e., foreigner-based discrimination and acculturation-based family conflict) were added. The first step of the model was significant in predicting 19% of the variance in

depressive symptoms. Results indicated that both economic hardship ( $\beta = .33, p < .01$ ) and parent–child conflict ( $\beta = .27, p < .01$ ) were significantly associated with higher levels of maternal depressive symptoms. The second step in the model predicted 3% additional variance in depressive symptoms and was statistically significant. However, in this step, acculturation-based family conflict ( $\beta = .16, p < .05$ ), but not foreigner-based discrimination, predicted maternal depressive symptoms above and beyond other types of stressors. Both universal stressors remained significant (see Table 2).

## Discussion

A large body of research identifies depression as the leading mental illness across cultures. Guided by previous work that found cultural stressors to be significant predictors of depressive symptoms in Latina/o adolescents (Stein, Gonzalez, & Huq, 2012), this study examined the additional predictive contributions of cultural stressors to understand depressive symptoms of Latina mothers in an emerging immigrant context. Results revealed a different pattern of association than with the adolescent data, where discrimination and not acculturative stress were related to depressive symptoms (Stein et al., 2012). For Latina mothers, economic hardship, parent–child conflict, and acculturation-based family conflict were all significantly associated with higher levels of maternal depressive symptoms, whereas foreigner-based discrimination was not predictive.

A great number of Latina/os migrate for monetary purposes to better their children's future (Catalano, 2010), but depending on documentation status, they may have to work low-paying jobs (Stein et al., 2016), creating the stress of not having enough money to provide for themselves and their families. Additionally, Latina/o culture dictates strong familism values that emphasize positive interpersonal relations within the family (Calderón-Tena, Knight, & Carlo, 2011; Knight et al., 2010). Because of these cultural values, Latina mothers may be especially vulnerable to discord within the family (Helms et al., 2014). Our findings suggest indeed that both parent–child conflict and acculturation-based family conflict are uniquely associated with maternal depressive symptoms. This is consistent with other work finding that when familial cultural expectations are violated, it predicts greater parent–child conflict (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Additionally, there was a significant correlation between parent–child conflict and acculturation-based family conflict, suggesting that mothers tend to perceive both types of conflict with their children. Our findings do suggest that culturally based conflict within the home is associated with greater maternal depressive symptoms. It is important to note that past research on the impact of acculturation-based conflict has primarily focused on adolescent experiences (Goforth et al., 2015; Goldbach, Berger Cardoso, Cervantes, & Duan, 2015; Romero & Roberts, 2003), and our study further contributes to this literature by suggesting that this type of conflict is harmful to parents' psychological functioning as well.

Importantly, our study also found that though acculturation-based family conflict was associated with greater maternal depressive symptoms, foreigner-based discrimination was not associated with these symptoms once controlled for other stressors. This is consistent with other work documenting that foreigner-based discrimination is more harmful for native-born college students compared with foreign-born students (i.e., Armenta et al., 2013). As noted by these authors, being treated as a perpetual foreigner may be experienced more negatively by native-

born populations who are treated as foreigners in their own land, whereas for immigrant groups, these experiences are not as negatively experienced because of their identity and cultural links to their native countries (Armenta et al., 2013).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study expands our understanding of cultural risks for Latina mothers and suggests that future research should consider the detrimental role of acculturation-based conflict in the family stress model as applied to Latina/o families. Clinicians should assess and attend to these experiences as contributing to depressive symptoms in immigrant families. Limitations of the current study include sampling only at one timepoint, so directionality could not be ascertained. Future studies should also assess this relation longitudinally to establish temporal sequencing and consider bidirectional models, as across development acculturative processes may impact parent psychopathology and vice versa. Finally, given that the study was conducted in an emerging immigrant community, future work should examine whether acculturation-based family conflict operates similarly in more established immigrant communities.

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