Risk-Taking Behaviors in First Generation Immigrant Adolescents: The Role of Acculturative Stress and Social Support

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Introduction

Acculturative stress arises in immigrants who experience difficulties in reconciling differences between their home and host cultures, such as incongruence in cultural values and practices, in language, and in the perceptions of their cultural group (Crockett et al., 2007).

Research shows that experiences of acculturative stress often lead to negative psychological, behavioral, and educational outcomes (Ijben & Khalid, 2010; Kiang et al., 2010).

Few studies have examined the links between acculturative stress and risk-taking behaviors.

Risk-taking behaviors are highly prevalent among mainstream American adolescents (Steinberg, 2007).

Research shows that an adolescent’s desire to fit in with their peers can lead to an increase in their risk-taking behaviors (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005).

Immigrant adolescents who are acculturating to mainstream America might increase their levels of risk-taking behaviors as an attempt to blend in with their mainstream American peers.

Social support as a protective factor for immigrant youth

Although acculturative stress is a risk to immigrants’ psychological well-being, theory and research suggest that social support might act as a protective factor against the onset of negative outcomes (Crockett et al., 2007).

Research shows that social support buffers the negative effects of acculturative stress by providing a safe space where immigrants’ identities can be validated.

However, limited research has examined the role of social support in the relation between acculturative stress and risk-taking behaviors.

Research questions

The current study investigated the relation between acculturative stress and risk-taking behaviors in first generation immigrant adolescents, as well as the role that social support played in this relation.

1. Are there ethnic group differences among first generation immigrant adolescents in terms of their risk-taking behaviors, acculturative stress, or social support?
2. Does acculturative stress predict risk-taking behaviors in first generation immigrant adolescents?
3. Does social support moderate the relation between acculturative stress and risk-taking behaviors in first generation immigrant adolescents?

Method

Participants

The present study included a sample of 189 first generation immigrant adolescents who are acculturating. This sample was drawn from the New York City Academic and Social Engagement Study (NYCASES; P. Selvajlot Singh).

Fifty-five percent were African American, 31% were Asian, and 14% were Hispanic. The average age of the participants was 16.7 years. Sixty-seven percent of the participants reported that the highest level of education for their mother was a high school degree or less.

MEASURES AND PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited from 15 New York City urban public high schools with a high population of immigrant origin students.

All participants and their parents were required to sign an informed consent form.

Self-report questionnaires were handed out to the participants during class time.

Results: Descriptives

Mean Differences in Risk-Taking Behaviors, Acculturative Stress, and Social Support by Ethnicity

- Black participants displayed higher scores of acculturative stress (Mean = 15.86, SD = 4.34) than Asian, Latino, and White adolescents.
- Asian participants reported lower levels of acculturative stress than Black, White, and Latino adolescents.
- Black participants engaged in substantially less marijuana use than Asian, Latino, and White adolescents.

Correlations between Risk-Taking Behaviors and the Study Variables

- Risk-taking behaviors correlated positively with acculturative stress, academic support, emotional support, and age of immigration.
- Risk-taking behaviors correlated negatively with marijuana use, binge drinking, and e-cigarette use.

Follow-up analyses showed that the relation between acculturative stress and marijuana use was significant for those with low academic social support (p = .004), but not for those with high academic social support.

Discussion

Levels of acculturative stress were negatively related to marijuana use among adolescents who are more acculturated in more risk-taking behaviors, specifically marijuana use.

This finding corroborates previous findings indicating that adolescents who have immigrated at younger ages, and therefore are more integrated into mainstream culture, show higher levels of substance use (Ehlers, Glider, Criaud, & Caetano, 2009).

First generation immigrants who reported high acculturative stress also experienced low academic support and engaged in substantially less marijuana use.

It is thus possible that immigrants with high levels of acculturative stress are the newest to the U.S. and therefore have less access to people who might provide positive resources or opportunities to engage in risk-taking behaviors.

This explanation is supported by current research which shows that recent immigrants display the lowest levels of risk-taking behaviors and that these levels increase as they spend more time in the U.S. (e.g., Myers et al., 2009).

Given these findings, future research should examine this model longitudinally to determine whether the relations change as immigrant adolescents enter the adult years.

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