

Improving Immigrant Adolescent Mental Health: The Role of Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

As immigration to the United States continues to rise, so does the population of second-generation immigrant children. They often face acculturation stressors, the psychological response of distinct ethnic groups coming into contact with the mainstream culture and the conflicts that may arise, in the face of a new culture, along with culture gaps with their parents as they struggle to find their place in American society. As these stressors proliferate even into their teenage years, youth mental health is at risk. Thus, this review aims to synthesize the best available evidence surrounding immigrant acculturation gaps, parental and peer influence, and cultural identity, along with the impact on mental health. Specifically, this paper seeks to answer the question: to what extent does preserving cultural identity benefit the mental health of second-generation immigrant adolescents in the United States? Of the literature reviewed, I find strong evidence that a stronger cultural identity has positive effects on immigrant youth mental health and can help mitigate acculturative pressures as adolescents immigrate to the U.S. I also examine differing perspectives on the negative role cultural identity plays in navigating adolescence, but overall, the research suggests a benefit of cultural identity on mental health.

Introduction

Out of the 327 million citizens living in the United States, 44.8 million are immigrants making up 13.7% of the population (Budiman). As the immigrant population has grown in the United States, the second-generation immigrant adolescent population has expanded as well, with 1 in 3 American youth being a child of an immigrant (American Psychological Association 1). Increasingly, more and more immigrant children feel out of place in the U.S., attempting to balance their parents' culture while also assimilating into American society. Selcuk R. Sirin, a psychologist affiliated with New York University, and other experts explain how this sensation is called "acculturative stress", defined as the psychological response of distinct ethnic groups encountering the mainstream culture and the conflicts that may arise between the two cultures (Sirin, et al 736). This increases mental health problems of thousands of adolescents in the U.S.; specifically, acculturative stress leads to "[...] more withdrawn, somatic and anxious/depressed symptoms," (Sirin, et al 736). In dealing with acculturative stress, second-generation youth were substantially more likely to develop major depressive symptoms and stress disorders as compared to first-generation adolescents (Salas - Wright, et al), making it imperative to look to the second-generation in this discussion. Furthermore, second-generation youth face "acculturation gaps", the differences in cultural identity between parents and children, which can complicate family relationships (Birman and Simon 213). Some experts contend the preservation of cultural identity can serve as a protective force against acculturative stress and social isolation to help maintain adolescent mental health. However, some experts argue the exact opposite: that a large focus on identity can result in less social acceptance and more family conflict, leading to more depression and anxiety. As immigration continues to increase and these issues will only continue, this paper seeks to answer the question: to what extent does preserving cultural identity benefit the mental health of second-generation immigrant adolescents in the United States?

Benefits of Preserving Cultural Identity

Maintaining a strong ethnic and cultural identity can provide a strong foundation for adolescents through forming support networks within families and communities. Acculturation gaps negatively impact family relationships and increase the risk of conflict, creating a place of hostility as opposed to a home (Marsiglia, et al). Due to these prominent acculturation gaps, it is crucial to harness the familial dynamic in decreasing these gaps that lead to poorer mental health, starting with shared culture. Dina Birman, a researcher of acculturation in immigrant adolescents from the University of Miami, and Corrina Simon, who has a PhD in psychology from the University of Illinois in Chicago, found that a stronger cultural identity in adolescents led to a more reliable social community and strengthened family bonds (216). Specifically, retaining and speaking the heritage language at home can reinforce connections and reduce generational gaps within a family since immigrant parents are often closely tied to their culture (Birman and Simon 214). Other aspects of culture such as wearing traditional clothing and participating in rituals represent synchronous behaviors that unify immigrant communities. An article by Michele J. Gelfand, a professor of cultural psychology at Stanford University, and other researchers analyzed synchronous rituals in cultural groups and found that maintaining traditions can positively impact members of that group. The study established that increased synchrony results in more prosociability towards others in the community along with more group cohesion (Gelfand, et al). The sense of communal identity and the social benefits that arise from strong relationships are clearly linked to cultural traditions, especially to decrease these acculturation gaps between parents and kids. Solidifying the relationship between cultural unity and mental health, depression and anxiety among immigrant youth decreased as a result of stronger family structure and cohesion (Mood, et al 340). Therefore, the familial aspects in shaping cultural identity benefit the mental health of adolescents by providing a safer and more cohesive social community.

The presence of a strong cultural identity for an adolescent can substantially help youth struggling with substance and alcohol abuse. As children develop in a bicultural world, they are forced to balance their identities -- their ethnic identity and their American identity. For example, Gogol, in the novel *The Namesake*, feels like he doesn't belong in American society and demonstrates how his ethnic name acts as a constant weight against him fitting in (Lahiri). This is an experience many immigrants youth face; according to Stacy Salerno, a professor of sociology, and others, adolescents struggle with mass acculturative stress, causing them to utilize drugs and alcohol as negative coping mechanisms (Salerno, et al). A meta - analysis from the peer reviewed journal *Applied and Preventive Psychology* demonstrated that there was a causal relationship of using alcohol and drugs as teenagers conformed to American peers' behaviors and neglected their heritage; researchers have determined that "acculturation diminishes a family's conservative stance on substance use in Latino families," (Koneru, et al). These findings suggest that many ethnic groups that happen to be more traditional than American society can prevent further substance abuse as the norms are typically stricter, which represents a "tight" group. In tightness - looseness theory, a theory used to understand cultural synchrony, "tighter" groups have stricter order and control, which is critical in the face of threats (Gelfand, et al) like acculturative stressors. Vamsi Koneru further corroborates that Latino youth who mainly spoke Spanish at home with their parents had a decreased risk of utilizing drugs as opposed to those who were highly acculturated into American society. These traditional family values mitigate acculturation stressors and prevent the need for such negative coping measures (Koneru, et al). Along with these findings, the benefits can be noted in the Native American population, specifically the Yup'ik Alaska Native ethnic group. Researchers working with elders in the community implemented a program to reconnect adolescents with their cultural roots, such as completing certain tasks in unity (Stringer). They were able to demonstrate a decrease in participants' suicidal thoughts and substance abuse since youth felt a stronger connection to their cultural community (Stringer). As Gelfand confirms, more synchronous behaviors specifically in a cultural context can be linked to more trust and unity in the community (Gelfand et al), reducing the need to rely on substances. Clarifying the connection between drug abuse and psychological health, adolescents struggling with substance abuse are more than 50% more likely to develop mental illness; increased anxiety, depression and panic disorders were all related to addiction (National Institute of Drug Abuse). Absent a strong cultural identity, adolescents

lack a community to support themselves through difficult stressors, which ultimately increases drug and alcohol abuse and a decline of mental health.

Furthermore, these psychological benefits from maintaining cultural traditions are grounded in scientific literature. Stephanie L. Haft, a researcher of clinical psychology, and other researchers write in the *Developmental Psychobiology* journal that acculturative stressors and identity can be explored through the field of stress biology. They explain how perceived discrimination is casually linked to increased cortisol (stress level) hormones, especially for immigrant adolescents who face a multitude of stressors in their adolescence (Haft, et al 398). However, the researchers determined that salient feelings about one's cultural group can mitigate this risk, where they note “[...] a separate study of Mexican–American adolescents found significant associations between greater ERI affirmation (positive feelings about one's ethnic group) and steeper diurnal cortisol slopes, which are considered to be an indicator of positive adaptation,” (Haft, et al 401). These findings suggest that cultural influence and positive acceptance of identity formulates a biological protective response against stress. Referring back to synchronous cultural behaviors, neuroscientific research using hyperscanning technology likewise finds that enhanced brain synchrony, like sharing aspects of culture, increases unity in a community (Gelfand, et al). Thus, Haft continues by explaining how family and community values moderated higher cortisol production; even when the individual was experiencing high production, the influence of cultural values was able to minimize the stress response, as adolescents felt that they belonged (Haft, et al 402). Cultural identity can further influence how adolescents deal with their mental health stressors by acting as a protective force against stressors. This scientific consensus solidifies the belief that cultural values can benefit adolescents who continually face increased stressors in their teenage years.

Counterarguments

Though some contend cultural identity has a strong link into benefiting youth mental health, others explain how it can increase discrimination and make youth more susceptible to depressive symptoms. Alan Meca, who holds a PhD in Developmental Psychology, and other experts find a directional relationship between ethnic identity and perceived discrimination, as “youth who feel a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic heritage may also be more inclined to engage in cultural practices that differentiate them from mainstream culture, potentially making them targets for ethnic discrimination,” (Meca, et al 992). The authors continue by drawing a connection between increased discrimination and substance use along with depressive symptoms (Meca, et al 992). Instead of formulating a stronger community, maintaining cultural identity would alienate youth and risk being targeted for being “different”. Thus, this negates the point that cultural influences can mitigate substance abuse risks and shelter youth against many acculturative stressors, one of which is discrimination.

However, the study identifies alternate causes to discrimination and further, substance abuse; in the limitations, the authors note that their focus on solely ethnic identity masks the large impact of acculturation on the child, which can lead to experiencing more discrimination while also losing the protective nature of their own culture (Meca, et al 994). Taking this into account, the study extends the position that ethnic identity can benefit youth, specifically dealing with discrimination and clearly denotes other issues that may impact their research. Additionally, Melinda Gonzales - Backen, a professor of family and child sciences with a focus in the psychological wellbeing of adolescents, and others analyzed a population of second-generation Latino immigrant teenagers, concluding that those with higher ethnic identity belonging perceived less discrimination since families became closer together and can intervene in discrimination of someone in their family (Gonzales - Backen, et al). Additionally, ritualistic synchrony and traditions were used in times of threat to unify the community; this can be analyzed in terms of adolescents in their community as a stronger cultural identity fundamentally results in preservation of mental health (Gelfand, et al). Therefore, the argument that identity leads to more discrimination cannot be validated as the majority of research finds influences actually benefit youth and their mental health.

Another counterargument stems from the use of heritage language at home, which can have adverse psychological effects, specifically in social relationships. A peer reviewed article published in the *Journal of Adolescent*

Health in 2003 explains how speaking a language other than English at home, most likely speaking an ethnic language, diminishes the self-esteem of the individual: “[...] in the other language and mixed language groups were more likely to report feeling helpless and not feeling confident; Hispanics were more likely to report difficulty making new friends if Spanish was spoken at home,” (Yu, et al 482). The effects were even more pronounced when the heritage language was exclusively spoken with family (Yu, et al 483), directly rebutting the statement that language brings families together to benefit mental health. If anything, the cultural differences break the bridges adolescents are already struggling to make in society and recreate worse feelings.

However, the study fails to consider how ethnic identity can benefit social relationships and form friendships. In an article written in the journal *Public Health in Practice*, the authors argue that the strength and pride towards a strong cultural identity helped youth form long standing friendships, both inside and outside their ethnicity, as an increased semblance of identity can spill over into sociability for adolescents in the long term (Choy, et al). This meta-analysis proves that sociability increases for adolescents and is preferable to Yu’s study; it examines more data and is more recent as it was published in 2021. Moreover, these studies do not rebut the empirical evidence that the protective effect of identity leads to reduced cortisol levels, providing the scientific perspective that solidifies how stressors ultimately decrease because of culture (Haft, et al 402). Thus, this argument doesn’t recognize the positive impacts of ethnic identity that continually benefit the mental health of adolescents.

Overall, although a stronger ethnic identity may result in more discrimination and less sociability -- both of which that are linked to worse mental health, these drawbacks are outweighed by the advantages of preserving cultural identity as it increases family connections, protects against substance abuse and solidifies unification within a community, leading to a positive correlation to mental health. Thus, these benefits will continually benefit second generation adolescents even in the long term, serving as a mitigating factor of detrimental acculturative stress.

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