

U.S. Mexican-Origin Mothers' and Youths' Bicultural Difficulties and Concurrent Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms

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Background

Balancing Cultures and Adjustment

U.S. Mexican-origin families often experience biculturalism—adapting to mainstream culture while retaining their ethnic culture (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Kim et al., 2014).

Researchers consider biculturalism a competency and stressor.

As a competency, past work with U.S. Latinxs suggests that successfully balancing two cultures leads to better adjustment, including lower anxiety and depressive symptoms (Carbajal et al., 2021; Safa & Umana-Taylor, 2021).

However, as a stressor, biculturalism may also lead to **bicultural difficulties (BD)**, meaning challenges relating to balancing two cultures (e.g., discomfort, unstable sense of identity; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Kim et al., 2014).

Past work with Chinese Americans suggests that BD relates to more depressive symptoms (Kim et al., 2014).

Related to BD, acculturative stress (stress from adapting to mainstream culture) relates to anxiety and depressive symptoms among U.S. Latinxs (Hovey & Magaña 2002a, 2002b).

This study extends the work on cultural stressors by examining the experience of BD for mothers and youths to capture a complete picture of cultural stressors in Mexican American families.

Biculturalism in Mother—Child Relationships

Recent work suggests that mothers' cultural experiences and stressors may influence youth biculturalism positively and negatively (Safa et al., 2020; Safa et al., 2021). However, limited research has examined how parental cultural stressors, like BD, impact youth adjustment.

Past work suggests that mothers' experiences of stress can impact youths' well-being (Zeiders et al., 2016).

However, no research to our knowledge has examined how youths' stress relates to mothers' well-being.

In addition to examining BD to mothers and youths' outcomes, we extend previous literature by considering the role of *mothers' BD for youths' outcomes* and the role of *youths' BD for mothers' outcomes*.

Current Study

Using longitudinal data, we examined Mexican-origin mothers' and youths' BD and the impact on their own and each other's anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Methods

Procedure

Mothers and youths ($N = 474$) participated in an annual survey for three waves.

Surveys were in English and Spanish.

Sample

Youth (55.6% girls) were, on average, 12 years old ($SD = .90$) at W1.

Mothers were, on average, 38 years old ($SD = 5.76$) at W1.

Most youths were U.S.-born (76.4%).

Nearly all mothers Mexico-born (99%).

Measures

Bicultural difficulties: We assessed BD using a 3-item Bicultural Management Difficulty Measure (e.g., I feel caught between the Mexican and U.S American cultures; Kim et al., 2014) at W1 to W3 [$\alpha = 0.69-0.76$ (mothers), $0.65-.081$ (youths)].

Anxiety symptoms: We assessed anxiety symptoms using a modified 4-item GAD scale (Spitzer et al., 2006) at W1 to W3 [$\alpha = 0.81-0.84$ (mothers), $0.75-.082$ (youths)].

Depressive symptoms: We assessed depressive symptoms using the 20-item CESD Scale (Radloff, 1977) at W1 to W3 [$\alpha = 0.78-0.79$ (mothers), $0.74-0.77$ (youths)].

Analyses

Using multilevel modeling, we examined anxiety and depressive symptoms changes across the three years.

BD was a time-varying predictor (assessed at all waves) and within-person centered to reflect how fluctuations in mothers' and youths' BD related to anxiety and depressive symptoms.

We also examined the interaction between mothers' and youths' BD on outcomes.

Results

Anxiety Symptoms

There was a within-person (WP) effect for mothers' and youths' BD; on years mothers and youths reported increases in BD, compared to their averages, they also reported greater anxiety symptoms (Table 1).

We also found that mothers' BD was marginally related to youths' anxiety symptoms (Table 1).

The interaction between mothers and youths' BD on anxiety symptoms wasn't significant.

Depressive Symptoms

There was a WP effect for mothers' and youths' BD; on years mothers and youths reported increases in BD, compared to their averages, they reported greater depressive symptoms (Table 1).

The interaction between mothers and youths' BD on depressive symptoms wasn't significant.

Table 1. Within-Person Effects of Mothers and Youths' Bicultural Difficulties on Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms

Variable	Anxiety Symptoms				Depressive Symptoms			
	Mothers		Youths		Mothers		Youths	
Intercept	0.95(.49)	0.05	2.51(.44)	<0.0001	1.08(.23)	<0.0001	2.02(.22)	<0.0001
M Age	0.01(.00)	<0.01	-0.01(.00)	0.18	0.01(.00)	<0.0001	0.00(.00)	0.94
M Education	-0.01(.01)	0.21	0.02(.01)	0.03	-0.01(.00)	0.08	0.01(.00)	0.03
Y Nativity	-0.02(.06)	0.72	-0.08(.05)	0.13	0.01(.03)	0.76	-0.05(.03)	0.05
Y Gender	-0.04(.05)	0.37	-0.20(.04)	<0.0001	0.00(.02)	0.83	-0.05(.02)	0.01
Y Age	0.03(.04)	0.49	-0.05(.04)	0.19	0.03(.02)	0.16	-0.02(.02)	0.36
Y Grade	-0.01(.05)	0.76	0.06(.04)	0.18	-0.03(.02)	0.17	-0.01(.02)	0.55
WP M BD	0.06(.02)	0.01	0.05(.02)	0.08	0.03(.01)	0.04	0.01(.01)	0.43
WP Y BD	0.02(.03)	0.55	0.10(.03)	<0.001	0.00(.01)	0.96	0.05(.01)	<0.001

Note. $N = 474$. M = Mother. Y = Youth. WP = Within-Person. BD = Bicultural Difficulty.

Discussion

Overview

Our findings align with past work (Kim et al., 2014), providing evidence that BD is maladaptive for Mexican-origin families.

When mothers' and youths' BD were concurrently higher than their averages, they reported greater anxiety and depressive symptoms.

When mothers' BD increased compared to their average, youth reported greater anxiety symptoms (marginally significant), but not depressive symptoms.

Although caution should be warranted with the finding above, it may point to how youth may start being sensitive to their mothers' BD because of their growing social-cognitive maturity to negotiate cultures (Quintana, 1998; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

We didn't find significant interactions between mothers' and youths' BD to outcomes or a WP effect for youths' BD to mothers' outcomes.

Implications

BD fluctuations can impact well-being, suggesting the importance of successfully balancing cultures among mothers and children.

It's important to find ways to increase the self-efficacy of families as past work has shown that increasing self-efficacy in solving cultural conflict improves family well-being (Basilio et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Directions

We didn't examine mechanisms that may explain the relation of mothers' BD to youths' outcomes and vice versa (e.g., language stressors, parenting practices; Kim et al., 2014; Safa et al., 2020).

We didn't examine biculturalism as a competency that may counteract BD (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

Future work can examine additional variables to capture a holistic view of biculturalism in mother—child relationships.



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