

Mexican Americans in Higher Education: Cultural Adaptation and Marginalization as Predictors of College Persistence Intentions and Life Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study examined how college persistence intentions and life satisfaction influenced by acculturation, enculturation, White marginalization, and Mexican American marginalization among 515 Mexican American college students. The utility of a path analysis model was supported. Enculturation positively predicted persistence and life satisfaction. Acculturation and White marginalization positively predicted persistence. Mexican American marginalization negatively predicted persistence and life satisfaction. The model explained 4% and 10% of the variance in college persistence intentions and life satisfaction, respectively.

Resumen

Este estudio examinó cómo aculturación, enculturación, la marginación europeo-americano y mexicana-americana influyó a las intenciones de persistir en la universidad y la satisfacción con la vida entre 515 estudiantes universitarios mexicano-americanos. La utilidad de un modelo de análisis de trayectoria fue apoyado. Enculturación positivamente predijo persistencia y satisfacción con la vida. Aculturación y marginación europeo-americano predijeron positivamente la persistencia en la universidad. La

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marginación mexicana-americana negativamente predijo la persistencia y satisfacción con la vida. El modelo explicó 4% y 10% de la varianza en las intenciones de persistir en la universidad y satisfacción con la vida, respectivamente.

Keywords

Mexican Americans, acculturation, academic persistence, life satisfaction

Mexican American college students are underrepresented in higher education. In fact, only 10.6% of Mexican Americans had received a college degree compared with 30.3% of Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). To address this problem, scholars have examined college persistence intentions as they have shown to be related to educational achievement and attainment for Latina/os (Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Kurpius & Rund, 2011). College persistence intentions are known as the goal, or intent, of persisting through college until a degree is completed (Tinto, 1993). Given the salience of college persistence intentions on academic achievement, this study seeks to determine cultural factors that may impact the process of academic persistence and life satisfaction for Mexican American college students to help inform interventions to decrease the educational attainment gap that exists for Mexican Americans.

Researchers have noted the importance of examining the role of culture on the educational experiences and well-being of Latina/o college students (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). For instance, cultural congruity (congruence between one's culture and that of the institution) was related to academic persistence and well-being among Latina/o college students (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Other research has found Latina/o students feel more alienated on campus than their White peers (Lopez, 2005). Although research has focused on cultural factors related to well-being and persistence, few studies have examined how cultural adaptation (i.e., acculturation, enculturation) impact Mexican American college student outcomes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to extend research by examining acculturation, enculturation, White marginalization, and Mexican American marginalization on the college persistence intentions and life satisfaction of Mexican Americans in higher education.

College persistence theories have traditionally focused on psychological models that emphasize the impact of the individual's abilities on dropout behavior such as aptitude and motivation (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004). However, these models do not fully address the cultural realities of Latina/o students and tend to ignore contextual variables such as the student-environment relation (Castillo et al., 2004). Scholars recommend that models consider psychosociocultural factors, such as negative perceptions of the university environment and cultural incongruity, in conducting research with Latina/o college students (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000).

Castillo et al. (2004) purports that because the university culture reflects White American values and beliefs Mexican American students may undergo an acculturative process as they learn and adopt the culture's behaviors and beliefs needed to succeed in college. The relationship between acculturation and academic persistence of Mexican American students has been surprisingly understudied and has produced

mixed results. Some studies have found that higher levels of acculturation were associated with academic persistence (e.g., Flores, Ojeda, Huang, Gee, & Lee, 2006), whereas other studies have shown no association (e.g., Ojeda & Flores, 2008). A reason why there may be inconsistent findings is that many studies tend to use a unilinear approach to the measurement of acculturation that may offer an incomplete rendering of the acculturation process as it fails to examine an individual's response to heritage culture norms (Castillo & Caver, 2009).

Bilinear acculturation models suggest that acculturation and enculturation (socialization to and maintenance of heritage culture norms) must be examined independently in research (Castillo & Caver, 2009). The need to examine enculturation separately from acculturation is illustrated in a study by Flores et al. (2006), which indicated that although acculturation to White American culture was related to higher levels of persistence among Mexican American high school students, enculturation was not. Similarly, Edwards and Lopez's (2006) study found enculturation predicted life satisfaction for Mexican American adolescents whereas acculturation did not. Given the empirical support for utilizing a bilinear approach to examine cultural adaptation, we examine acculturation and enculturation independently in the proposed path model.

Consistent with the bilinear model of acculturation, an individual can be integrated behaviorally to a culture and yet not adopt the culture's values and beliefs (Castillo et al., 2004). For example, Castillo and colleagues found Mexican American college students were behaviorally acculturated into White American culture, but did not accept White American values and beliefs. This phenomenon was referred to as White attitudinal marginalization. Castillo et al. (2004) also found that while White attitudinal marginalization significantly predicted Mexican American college student distress whereas acculturation was not.

As previously noted, enculturation is one component of the cultural adaptation process. However, individuals may not choose to maintain their heritage culture's values and beliefs (Berry, 2003). When two cultures' norms conflict with each other, the acculturating individual may experience mental tension, which in turn can result in changes in the individual's ethnic identity (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). Thus, it is possible for an acculturating Mexican American college student to reject heritage cultural values and beliefs (i.e., Mexican American attitudinal marginalization). This study extends previous acculturation research by examining White and Mexican American attitudinal marginalization and its relation to college persistence.

In addition, the role of culture on life satisfaction should be noted because people's perceptions of what makes them happy vary by culture and depend on culture (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). It is particularly important to understand the life satisfaction of Mexican Americans in college as this could have implications on their ability to thrive and survive in higher education. While the "good life" is influenced by internal and external factors, cultural components such as norms, attitudes, and beliefs about oneself and others may override such influence (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Differences in how cultures perceive their self-enhancement and the extent to which a cultural group is willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the group may also be

indicators of discrepancies in happiness across cultures (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Much research on the influence of culture on happiness has focused on cross-cultural comparisons and is one criticism of the well-being literature (Benet-Martínez & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2003).

A study examining the role of cultural factors on the life satisfaction of Latina/o college students found ethnicity-related stress had a negative effect on their mental health (Ojeda, Navarro, Rosales Meza, & Arbona, 2012). A further study on the life satisfaction of Mexican American youth concluded that students perceived their family to be the most important contributor to their life satisfaction (Edwards & Lopez, 2006). In addition, results concluded that enculturation but not acculturation, was related to life satisfaction. Furthermore, worrying about and pessimistic perceptions of race-relations among Latina/o high school students was negatively related to life satisfaction (Brown, Wallace, & Williams, 2001). In addition, results suggested Latina/o students had lower levels of life satisfaction than their White peers. In contrast however, Crocker and Major (1989) concluded that the well-being of stigmatized group members is just as high as that of nonstigmatized group members. Given these contradictory findings and the minimal research that has been conducted to date, further research on the life satisfaction of Mexican American college students is needed. Thus, an additional purpose of this study was to examine the influence of enculturation, Mexican American marginalization, and college persistence on the life satisfaction of Mexican American college students.

Method

Participants

A total of 515 Mexican American students (314 female, 189 male, 12 undisclosed) attending The University of Texas–Pan American participated in this study. This university is located on the Texas–México border in the Rio Grande valley, with 91% of its student population identifying as “Hispanic.” In 2012, approximately 19,000 undergraduate students were enrolled of which 67% were identified as “low income students” (The University of Texas–Pan American, 2012). The majority of the participants were sophomores (43%), followed by juniors (26%), 1st years (24%), and seniors (7%). Students ranged in age from 17 to 54 years ($M = 20.61$, $SD = 4.04$). Most were second-generation Mexican Americans (U.S. born; 46%), followed by first-generation (México born; 19%), fourth-generation (grandparents U.S. born; 14%), third-generation (parents U.S. born; 11%), and fifth-generation (great grandparents U.S. born; 9%).

Instruments

Demographics. A demographic survey was included to gather information about participants’ ethnicity, age, gender, grade level, and generation level.

Cultural adaptation. The 30-item Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans—II (ARSMA-II; Cuellar et al., 1995) measures orientation to Mexican and Anglo cultures. It contains two subscales, the Mexican Orientation Subscale (MOS) and the Anglo Orientation Subscale (AOS). A sample MOS item includes, “I like to identify myself as a Mexican American.” A sample AOS item includes, “I associate with Anglos.” Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely often or almost always* (5). Item responses were averaged to obtain a subscale mean, with higher scores on the MOS or AOS reflecting orientations toward Mexican or Anglo cultures, respectively. Concurrent validity was supported through correlations with the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (Stephenson, 2000). Previous studies on Mexican Americans have resulted in Cronbach’s alpha scores of .76 (Castillo et al., 2004) for the AOS and .92 (Flores et al., 2006) for the MOS. In the present study, the MOS and AOS yielded Cronbach’s alphas of .90 and .66, respectively.

Marginalization. The 18-item Marginality Scale (Cuellar et al., 1995) contains three subscales that measure difficulty with accepting the ideas, beliefs, customs, and values of the White, Mexican, and Mexican American culture. For the present study, only the White and Mexican American subscales were used. Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely often or almost always* (5). Responses were averaged to obtain subscale mean scores with higher scores indicating difficulty accepting a culture’s values and beliefs. Previous studies on Mexican Americans have resulted in Cronbach’s alpha scores of .88 (Castillo et al., 2004) for White marginalization and .91 for Mexican American marginalization (Cuellar et al., 1995). In the present study, the White and Mexican American marginalization subscales yielded Cronbach’s alpha of .91.

College persistence. The 30-item Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decisions Scale (PVDDS; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) measures the academic nonpersistence decisions of college students. Sample items include “I am confident that I made the right decision in choosing to attend this university” and “It is not important to me to graduate from this university.” Participants responded to items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The goal of the present study was to examine academic persistence as opposed to nonpersistence. Thus, the Likert scale range was reversed so that a score of 1 represents strongly disagree and a score of 5 represents strongly agree, with higher scores indicating more academic persistence. Previous studies have resulted in Cronbach’s alpha scores of .83 with Latina/o (Castillo et al., 2006) college students. The internal consistency in the present study was .74.

Life satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) evaluates participants’ overall life satisfaction. This scale consists of five items (e.g. “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”) that were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7),

Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics among Measured Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Enculturation	—					
2. Acculturation	-.08	—				
3. Mexican American Marginalization	-.11*	-.01	—			
4. White Marginalization	.08	-.14**	.50**	—		
5. Academic Persistence	.14**	-.08	.06	.07	—	
6. Life Satisfaction	.13**	.08	-.12**	-.03	.28**	—
<i>M</i>	3.80	3.73	1.79	2.22	3.41	4.97
<i>SD</i>	0.79	0.45	0.77	0.89	0.35	1.28
α	.90	.66	.91	.91	.74	.78

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

with higher scores indicating more satisfaction with life. Convergent validity has been supported by significant positive correlations with measures of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1985). The internal consistency in the present study was .78.

Procedure

This study received approval from the institutional review boards of the institution conducting the research and the institution in which investigators recruited the participants. Several professors granted the researchers permission to survey students in their social sciences courses during the spring semester. All students in the courses were given the option to participate. Each potential participant was given the opportunity to decline participation. Researchers distributed and explained an informed consent form, which listed the benefits and risks of participation in the research, purpose of the study and contact information for the primary investigator as well as the institutional review board from the researching university. All materials, including the questionnaire were given using paper-and-pencil format and were in English. The consent procedure and questionnaire administration took about 30 min to complete, and all forms were completed during class time. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. As an incentive to participate, each participant was entered into a raffle for a chance to win a gift certificate for an online store.

Results

The data met statistical assumptions for outliers, multivariate normality, linearity, and multicollinearity. The means, standard deviations, ranges, reliability coefficients, and correlations for each of the measured variables are presented in Table 1.

A path analysis was conducted using AMOS maximum likelihood procedure to test the model fit. We examined the role of acculturation, enculturation, White marginalization, and Mexican American marginalization on academic persistence. Furthermore,

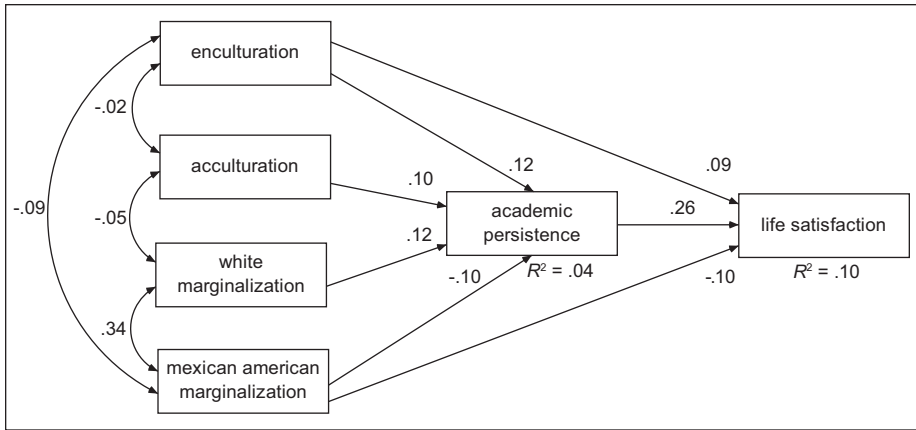


Figure 1. Path analysis for the hypothesized model.

Note. All paths were significant at $p < .05$.

the role of enculturation, Mexican American marginalization, and academic persistence were hypothesized to predict life satisfaction. Previous literature has suggested that the model fit be evaluated by the following criteria (Weston & Gore, 2006): a chi-squared (χ^2) that is not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, comparative fit index (CFI) $\geq .90$, and a root M^2 error of approximation (RMSEA) close to 0.0. Findings demonstrated a significant model fit: $\chi^2(4, N = 515) = 4.99, p > .05$; RMSEA = .02 (CI = [.00, .07]); SRMR = .03; CFI = .99. Path coefficients were all significant at the $p > .05$ and are depicted in Figure 1.

In addition, a significant amount of variance in academic persistence ($R^2 = .04$), $F(4, 505) = 5.11, p = .0001$ was explained by all predictors in the path model: enculturation ($\beta = .12, t = 2.74, p = .006$), acculturation ($\beta = .10, t = 2.30, p = .022$), White marginalization ($\beta = .12, t = 2.41, p = .016$), and Mexican American marginalization ($\beta = -.10, t = -2.06, p = .040$). Furthermore, a significant amount of variance in life satisfaction ($R^2 = .10$), $F(3, 507) = 18.27, p = .0001$, was explained by all predictors in the path model: enculturation ($\beta = .09, t = 2.03, p = .043$), Mexican American marginalization ($\beta = -.10, t = -2.24, p = .026$), and academic persistence ($\beta = .26, t = 6.21, p = .0001$).

Discussion

This study examined the role of acculturation, enculturation, White marginalization, and Mexican American marginalization on Mexican American college students' college persistence intentions and life satisfaction. Although studies have not measured the relationship of cultural adaptation to Mexican Americans' college persistence, the findings support the conjectures of previous research that cultural variables and perceived context influences Mexican American students' persistence (Castillo et al., 2006) and well-being.

Results indicated cultural adaptation significantly and independently influenced college persistence intentions. College persistence was positively influenced by being acculturated to White American culture as well as enculturated to Mexican American culture. This finding is consistent with research that found acculturation was related to educational goals (Flores et al., 2006). As there is no other study to date that we could find that examined enculturation's influence to college persistence, our finding that enculturation is also a significant and unique predictor suggests that future research should examine acculturation using a bilinear model. For Mexican Americans in a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), these results speak to the salience that being bicultural, having high levels of acculturation and enculturation, can have even when surrounded with those from their heritage culture. In this setting, students should be encouraged to embrace the mainstream culture while also maintaining their heritage culture in an attempt to increase academic persistence.

Results suggest that degree of comfort with and acceptance of White American and Mexican American cultural values also influenced college persistence intentions. Students who reported discomfort with traditional Mexican American values and beliefs also reported lower persistence intentions. This finding is consistent with other studies that suggest the importance of attachment to one's heritage culture (Castillo et al., 2004; Schneider & Ward, 2003). Unexpectedly, discomfort with White American values and beliefs was related to higher persistence intentions. Castillo et al. (2004) found White attitudinal marginalization was related to increased distress for Latina/o college students. Thus, one would expect poor psychological adjustment would increase the risk of withdrawing from college. A possible explanation for this finding is that students were from an HSI, so students may be exposed to more Mexican American cultural values and beliefs at this institution than if they attended a predominantly White institution (PWI). Furthermore, this may also explain why Mexican American attitudinal marginalization was associated to lower persistence intentions. These findings highlight the importance of using a situation-centered approach because it is the context (i.e., HSI) as well as one's perception of the context that can influence how acculturative factors influence persistence (Castillo et al., 2004; Nuñez, 2009). Future research can examine how attitudinal marginalization from White American and Mexican American cultural values influences Mexican American college persistence intentions at HSIs and PWIs, respectively.

Results indicated enculturation was related to a greater sense of life satisfaction. That is, the more embedded Mexican American college students were in their heritage culture the more satisfied they were with life. Relatedly, greater Mexican American marginalization reduced life satisfaction. Thus, when Mexican American students do not feel like they belong to their Mexican American culture they are less likely to be satisfied with life. Similar research has stressed the importance of cultural constructs on the life satisfaction of Chinese adolescents (Verkuyten & Lay, 1998). College students of color have also demonstrated the importance of ethnic identity to their psychosocial well-being (St. Louis & Liem, 2005). In contrast however, research has found that acculturation, but not enculturation, was related to less-depressive symptoms among Latina/o college students (Cuellar & Roberts, 1997). Within the context

of an HSI, the Mexican American students sampled are immersed in their heritage culture. Thus, when they do not feel part of it, the effects of the marginalization may be greater than if they were at a PWI. Future research would benefit from investigating the differences that may exist in the effect that enculturation and marginalization in HSIs and PWIs. In addition, these mixed findings warrant a need for additional research on the role of cultural constructs on Mexican American college students' well-being.

Our study also indicated that college persistence was related to life satisfaction. That is, when Mexican American college students persisted in their academic endeavors they were more satisfied with life. This is consistent with research that found high school students with high life satisfaction reported positive academic experiences and high GPAs (Gilman & Scott Huebner, 2006). Despite statistics demonstrating low academic achievement among Mexican Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), our research shows that persistence in college is important for their well-being. Regardless of the setting that Mexican American students find themselves in (i.e., HSI vs. PWI), a primary goal of being in college is to do well and work toward the goal of graduating. Although data of this study do not have information about the effect of those from a PWI, we hypothesize that college persistence would also have the same effect. Future research should attempt to replicate these findings with Mexican American students who are attending college in an institution that has a different ethnic composition.

Limitations

The limitations of this study should be noted. First, the findings of this study should be generalized with caution because our sample consisted of Mexican American college students living near the Texas–México border. Thus, Mexican Americans and other Latina/o ethnic groups attending PWIs may have differing experiences in higher education. A further limitation lies within the reliability of the acculturation scale given its low alpha coefficient. Future studies may want to use a measure of acculturation that has a better score of reliability. In addition, this study is limited in its ability to measure actual college persistence. Future research may assess college persistence by using a longitudinal methodology that captures dropout rates.

Implications

The findings of this study provide insight that can help university staff working with Mexican American college students. Most notable is that acculturation of White American culture and enculturation of Mexican American culture are important to college persistence. Thus, even HSIs must address acculturation to the college culture. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) suggest that university staff can assist with the transition of Latina/o students to college by ensuring an infrastructure of comprehensive mentoring programs. University faculty and staff can volunteer to mentor students to help introduced to the college culture. Advanced college students can also be used as mentors to newer students.

Castellanos and Gloria (2007) noted that Latina/o students gain cultural affirmation by creating an academic family. They suggest creating knowledge-based programming that affirms cultural and familial interactions since such resources have been shown to be beneficial for student retention (Schneider & Ward, 2003). They also suggest implementing activities that create a family-like role as a means of infusing family into the college culture. For example, the first author's institution has created the *Mi Casa Es Su Casa* program. Volunteer Latina/o faculty and staff are each assigned a group of five to eight Latina/o students as their mentees. Once a month the volunteers host a dinner at their respective homes for their mentees. The purpose of the program is to create a "home away from home" to a cohort of students as well as give the students an opportunity to develop a support system from other students and professors. It is activities such as these that enable Latina/o students to stay connected to their cultural heritage.

In sum, our study highlights the importance of understanding the cultural factors that influence college persistence intentions and well-being of Mexican Americans in higher education. We hope that understanding the importance of cultural adaptation can help universities increase completion rates by informing the creation of effective and culturally appropriate interventions to promote academic success and positive mental health among Mexican Americans in higher education.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biographies

Lizette Ojeda is an assistant professor of counseling psychology at Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on Mexican American and Latino immigrant issues. More specifically, her area of expertise is on the role of cultural adaptation and masculinity ideology on Latino males' education, mental health, and physical health.

Linda G. Castillo is a professor and director of training of the Counseling Psychology program at Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on the influence of acculturation, enculturation, and marianismo on educational persistence and mental health of Mexican American adolescents and women. She is the associate editor for the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* and a fellow of the American Psychological Association.

Rocío Rosales Meza, PhD, is a Mexican woman, first generation in her family to be born in the United States, and is bilingual in Spanish and English. Currently, she is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of La Verne. She enjoys spending time with her husband, Bryan Vaai, her family, listening to music, and learning about and honoring diverse cultures.

Brandy Piña-Watson is currently a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology at Texas A&M University. Her research efforts focus on cultural predictors of Latina/o adolescent, college student, and immigrant mental health.