

Predictors of Identity Distress in Immigrant Youth

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant youth adapting to a new ecology may be particularly susceptible to experiencing difficulties related to identity formation. In this study, the relationships among various aspects of ecological context, acculturation conflict, and identity distress were examined in a sample of immigrant children and adolescents. The results lend support to a model in which social support and ecological risk factors are linked to identity distress both directly and through their association with acculturation conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Identity formation is a process that may engender significant distress as children move through adolescence, especially those who belong to societies that host individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Some identity distress may be normative for individuals native to such societies, but immigrant youths may experience more profound distress. Many immigrant children are faced with factors such as discrimination, socioeconomic disadvantage, and restrictive neighborhoods that may reduce their potential identity alternatives, increasing their distress (Schwartz, Montgomery, Briones, 2006).

These factors may also exacerbate acculturation conflict that immigrant children already experience as a result of incongruence between the mores and ethos of their culture of origin and those of the host culture, further accentuating identity distress. At the same time, supportive social networks may reduce such conflict and distress. In this study, we tested a hypothetical model in which economic difficulty, discrimination, neighborhood quality, and social support are linked to identity distress directly and indirectly through acculturation conflict.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 507 public school students (254 male; 253 female) in grades 5 through 11 who came from Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, and the West Indies. Students were interviewed in their third post-migration year, individually, at school, in their primary language, by interviewers of similar ethnic background.

Measures

Measures were part of a larger study on the adaptation of immigrant children.

- *Economic difficulty.* Measured by asking children, "How often does your family have problems paying for things that the family really needs, like food, clothing, or rent—never, very little, sometimes, often, or almost always?"
- *Discrimination.* Measured with an 11-item scale (Jackson, in progress) addressing exposure to a variety of discriminatory situations.
- *Neighborhood Quality.* Assessed with a 6-item bipolar adjective scale (Kasl et al., 1980).
- *Social support.* The total amount of support provided by the participant's social network across six support functions (Levitt et al., 1993).
- *Acculturation conflict.* Measured with a scale developed by Gil and Vega (1996) that asks about participants' conflict with parents and other difficulties related to acculturation.
- *Identity distress.* Assessed with a 5-item version of Berman et al.'s (2004) Identity Distress Scale, which asks the degree to which participants have been upset or worried about making decisions concerning their friendships, religious beliefs, moral values, goals, and future occupation.

RESULTS

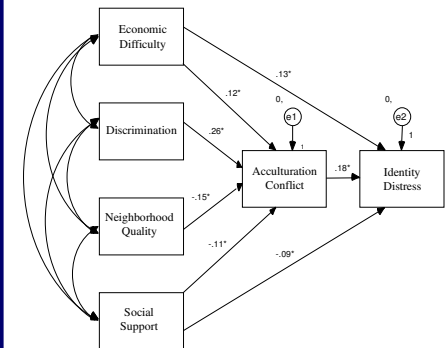
- Preliminary analyses indicated no direct links from discrimination and neighborhood quality to identity distress. Thus, these paths were dropped from the model.
- Structural equation analysis indicated that the trimmed model was consistent with the data overall ($\chi^2 = 1.50, p > .47, CFI = 1.00$). The results are depicted in Figure 1.
- Discrimination, economic difficulty, neighborhood quality, and social support were linked to acculturation conflict.
- Acculturation conflict was, in turn, linked to identity distress.
- Economic difficulty and support were also associated directly with distress.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that acculturation conflict is associated with identity distress in immigrant children and adolescents. Furthermore, those living in less desirable neighborhoods, with more economic difficulty, who experience more discrimination, and have less available support, are especially likely to experience more acculturation conflict and, directly or indirectly, distress over identity issues.

The findings affirm that challenges encountered by many immigrant youth are associated with worries over establishing an identity in the context of their post-migration ecology. Interventions targeting identity issues may be particularly helpful for these dislocated youth.

Figure 1



Note. Numbers are standardized regression weights.
* $p < .05$

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