

# Psychosocial Predictors of Acculturative Stress in Central American Immigrants

Joseph D. Hovey<sup>1</sup>

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Little previous research has examined acculturative stress among Central American immigrants in the United States. This study explored psychosocial predictors of acculturative stress in a sample of Central American immigrants in Los Angeles. Bivariate and multivariate analyses revealed that family dysfunction, nonmarried status, ineffective social support, nonpositive expectations for the future, infrequent church attendance, and lack of agreement with the decision to migrate were significantly associated with greater levels of acculturative stress. The findings highlight the importance of using culturally relevant clinical methods when assessing and treating acculturating individuals.

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Immigrants may experience many stressors during the process of adapting to a new society. For example, individuals new to a country may experience the severing of ties to family and friends in the country of origin. This may result in feelings of loss and lead to a reduction in effective coping resources. Immigrants may also experience factors that are particular to the new environment, including discrimination, language inadequacy, lack of social and financial resources, stress and frustration associated with unemployment and/or low income, feelings of not belonging in the host society, and a sense of anxious disorientation in response to the unfamiliar environment. Acculturating individuals may also feel pulled between traditional values, norms, and customs and those in the new society (e.g., parent-child conflict due to the child's encountering of the new culture through school and role conflict due to a working mother).

## MODEL OF ACCULTURATIVE STRESS

The previously mentioned types of experiences are encapsulated by the term "acculturative stress."

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109. Current address: Department of Psychology, The University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio 43606.

Acculturative stress refers to the stress that directly results from and has its source in the acculturative process (1). According to Berry *et al.* (2), the level of acculturative stress that is experienced by an acculturating individual may vary from a small amount to the point where it virtually destroys one's ability to carry on.

Berry and Kim (3) and Williams and Berry (4) presented a conceptual framework for studying acculturative stress. Their model identified psychological and social factors that may account for high versus low levels of acculturative stress. These include social support found within the new community; immediate and extended family support networks; socioeconomic status (SES), including work-status changes and specific characteristics of SES such as education and income; premigration variables such as adaptive functioning (self-esteem, coping ability, and psychiatric status) and knowledge of the new language and culture; cognitive attributes such as attitudes toward acculturation (positive or nonpositive) and expectations for the future; and the degree of tolerance for and acceptance of cultural diversity (multicultural versus assimilationist) within the mainstream society. Hovey and King (5) suggested additional variables that may be incorporated into an acculturative stress framework: level of religiosity, age at migration, generation in the new community, and control and choice

in the decision to migrate (voluntary move versus involuntary).

The previous factors may serve as buffers against acculturative stress and thus may be used to predict levels of acculturative stress. Acculturating individuals with positive expectations for the future and relatively high levels of family support may, for example, experience less acculturative stress than individuals without the same expectations and support.

### PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS AMONG CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS

Padilla *et al.* (6) qualitatively examined the psychosocial stressors experienced by Central American ( $n = 30$ ) and Mexican American immigrants ( $n = 32$ ) in the United States. A content analysis of each interview identified the major stressors related to culture change, including not knowing English (identified by 32% of the sample); employment issues such as not having a job (45%) and not having sufficient money for rent, food, and clothing (81%); having an undocumented status (30%); stressors associated with leaving the country of origin, such as the absence of family and friends (85%); not knowing anyone to help take care of children (13%); the lack of adequate transportation (35%); discrimination (22%); and a conflict in value systems, such as finding a more liberal lifestyle in the United States (16%). Padilla *et al.* identified these stressors in their sample as a whole. Thus, it is not clear what percentages of these stressors were specific to the Central American immigrants.

Padilla *et al.*'s (6) findings are important because they identify some of the specific acculturative stressors that may be experienced by Central American immigrants in the United States. However, no studies have examined psychosocial predictors of acculturative stress among Central American immigrants in the United States. The current study is guided by the acculturative model outlined previously. The purpose of the current study is to explore psychosocial predictors of acculturative stress in a sample of Central American immigrants. As noted, these variables may serve as buffers in the reduction of acculturative stress. The variables explored are family functioning, marital status, family intactness, social support, expectations for the future, religiosity, education and income (specific indicators of SES), and control and choice in the decision to migrate (motives for the move).

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants were 78 immigrants (64 females and 14 males) of Central American descent from an English as second language (ESL) community adult school in Los Angeles, California. English proficiency among the participants was extremely limited. All of the participants were native speakers of Spanish. The age of the sample ranged from 17 to 75 ( $M = 38.58$ ,  $SD = 16.44$ ). Forty-eight percent (48.1%) of the sample were aged 17 to 35; 33.8% were aged 36 to 55; and 18.2% were aged 56 to 77.

Eighty percent of the participants were Catholic; 2.7% were Protestant; 1.3% were Jewish; 9.3% reported "other" religious affiliations; and 6.7% reported no religious affiliation. Seventy-one percent (71.1%) of the participants originated from El Salvador, 17.1% from Guatemala, 9.2% from Honduras, and 2.6% from Nicaragua.

The number of years living in the United States ranged from 1 to 32 years ( $M = 8.43$ ,  $SD = 8.69$ ). Forty-eight percent (47.5%) of the sample have lived in the United States for 1 to 4 years; 24.6% have lived in the United States for 5 to 10 years; and 27.9% have lived in the United States for 11 years or longer. Acculturation level, measured according to Marín *et al.* (7), ranged from 5 to 12 ( $M = 7.12$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ). The possible range, indicating low to high acculturation, was 5 to 25. The overall sample thus revealed relatively low levels of acculturation.

### Measures

A self-administered battery of questionnaires was used. A background information form assessed age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, religiosity, age at migration, control and choice in the decision to migrate, family intactness (country in which most of family lives), occupation, education, and family income.

#### *Religion Variables*

To assess perception of religiosity, influence of religion, and church attendance, the background information form asked the following three questions, which were designed specifically for this study. "How religious are you?" (Possible responses consisted of

the following: 1, not at all religious; 2, slightly religious; 3, somewhat religious; 4, very religious.) “How much influence does religion have upon your life?” (Possible responses consisted of the following: 1, not at all influential; 2, slightly influential; 3, somewhat influential; 4, very influential.) “How often do you attend church?” (Possible responses consisted of the following: 1, never; 2, once or twice a year; 3, once every 2 or 3 months; 4, once a month; 5, two or three times a month; 6, once a week or more.)

#### *Control and Choice in the Decision to Migrate*

To assess perception of control and choice in the decision to migrate, the background information form asked the following two questions, which were developed specifically for this study: “If you were born in another country, did you contribute to the decision to move to the United States?” [Possible responses consisted of the following: 1, not at all; 2, some (a little bit); 3, moderate (pretty much); 4, very much (a great deal).] “If you were born in another country, did you agree with the decision to move to the United States?” (Possible responses consisted of the following: 1, strongly disagreed; 2, disagreed; 3, agreed; 4, strongly agreed.)

#### *Family Assessment Device*

The General Functioning subscale of the Family Assessment Device (FAD) (8) was used to measure family functioning. The FAD is a self-report scale consisting of statements that participants endorse in terms of how well each statement describes their family. Items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale (“strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), with scaled scores ranging from 1.00 (healthy) to 4.00 (unhealthy). The FAD has been found (8, 9) to have adequate internal consistency reliability (.72–.92), test–retest reliability (.66–.76), and construct validity. The Cronbach alpha coefficient (for the General Functioning subscale) for the study was .71.

#### *The Personal Resource Questionnaire*

The Personal Resource Questionnaire—Part 2 (PRQ85) (10) was used to measure social support. Part 2 of the PRQ85 measures the perceived effectiveness of social support and consists of 25 items

rated on a 7-point Likert scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). Possible scores range from 25 to 175. Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived social support. Examples of items are the following: “I belong to a group in which I feel important”; “I have people to share social events and fun activities with”; “I can’t count on my friends to help me with problems”; and “Among my group of friends we do favors for each other.” The PRQ85—Part 2 has been found (10–12) to have adequate internal consistency reliability (.87–.93), test–retest reliability (.72), and construct validity. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the study was .85.

#### *SAFE Scale*

Acculturative stress was measured with the SAFE scale (13). This scale consists of 24 items that measure acculturative stress in social, attitudinal, familial, and environmental contexts in addition to perceived discrimination (majority group stereotypes) toward migrant populations. Participants rate each item that applies to them on a 5-point Likert scale (“not stressful” to “extremely stressful”). The possible scores range from 0 to 120. Examples of items are the following: “People think I am unsociable when in fact I have trouble communicating in English” “It bothers me that family members I am close to do not understand my new values”; and “Because of my ethnic background, I feel that others exclude me from participating in their activities.” The SAFE scale has been found to have adequate internal consistency reliability (.89) (13) and construct validity (14). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the study was .90.

#### *Expectations for the Future*

To measure individual attitudes and expectancies concerning the future, the following open-ended question was asked: “What do you think the future will be like for you and your family?” Each response was coded as positive (hopeful) or nonpositive (non-hopeful) by three research assistants blind to the study’s hypotheses and other questionnaire responses. The interrater reliability, calculated as a percentage agreement, was 96.5%. Disagreements were resolved by consensus.

### Translation

The background information form and open-ended question were developed in English and, along with the other measures, were translated into Spanish through the double-translation procedure (15) with the help of two translators.

### Procedure

Participants were administered the self-report questionnaires in a classroom setting. Five ESL classes participated in the study. At the beginning of each of the five classes, the primary investigator notified the students about the general topic of study and noted that their participation was entirely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Those willing to participate were then administered the self-report questionnaires. Within these classes, 78 (95%) of 82 students chose to participate. The other 4 students refused to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires were in Spanish and required approximately 45 minutes to complete. The primary investigator and teachers read questionnaire items to those participants who needed assistance. Each individual who completed the questionnaire was given \$5.00 for his or her participation.

### Data Analyses

The data analyses are presented in three steps. Descriptive statistics are first presented. Then, bivariate associations among the predictor variables and acculturative stress are presented. Specifically, Pearson correlation coefficients were used to assess the relationships among the continuous predictor variables (family functioning and social support) and acculturative stress. Spearman correlation coefficients (16) were used to assess the relationships among the ordinal predictor variables (perception of religiosity, influence of religion, church attendance, contribution to the decision to migrate, agreement with the decision to migrate, education, and income) and acculturative stress. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to assess the effects of the categorical predictor variables (expectations for the future, marital status, and family intactness) on acculturative stress. Finally, a stepwise multiple regression analysis is presented. It was conducted to determine the best predictors of acculturative stress.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

#### *Education, Income, Marital Status, Expectations for the Future, and Family Intactness*

Table I shows the frequency distributions for education, income, marital status, expectations for the future, and family intactness. Most participants reported relatively low levels of formal education and income. In addition, most participants were coded as having positive expectations for the future, and most

**Table I.** Sample Distributions for Sociodemographic Variables

Variable	%	<i>n</i>
<b>Education</b>		
0–2 years of school	14.7	11
3–5 years of school	17.3	13
6–8 years of school	33.3	25
9–11 years of school	16.0	12
High school graduate	10.7	8
Some college	6.7	5
Bachelor's degree	1.3	1
Graduate degree	0.0	0
<b>Income</b>		
\$0–4,999	35.7	20
\$5,000–14,999	33.9	19
\$15,000–24,999	21.4	12
\$25,000–34,999	3.6	2
\$35,000–44,999	1.8	1
\$45,000–59,999	1.8	1
\$60,000–80,000	1.8	1
Over \$80,000	0.0	0
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	22.1	17
Never married	42.8	33
Separated	13.0	10
Divorced	7.8	6
Widowed	6.5	5
Common law/living together	7.8	6
<b>Expectations for the future</b>		
Positive	93.2	69
Nonpositive	6.8	5
<b>Family intactness</b>		
Central America	71.4	55
United States	28.6	22
<b>Church attendance</b>		
Never	6.7	5
Once or twice a year	9.3	7
Once every 2 or 3 months	12.0	9
Once a month	5.3	4
Two or three times a month	17.3	13
Once a week or more	49.3	37

individuals reported that a majority of family members lived in Central America.

*Church Attendance, Perception of Religiosity, and Influence of Religion*

Table I shows the frequency distribution for church attendance. Almost half of the sample attended church at least once a week. The mean score for perception of religiosity was 2.37 (SD = 0.66). The mean score for perceived influence of religion was 2.74 (SD = 1.04).

*Contribution to the Decision to Migrate and Agreement with the Decision to Migrate*

The mean score for contribution to the decision to migrate was 3.29 (SD = 0.96). The mean score for agreement with the decision to migrate was 3.43 (SD = 0.80).

*Family Functioning, Social Support, and Acculturative Stress*

Table II lists the means and standard deviations for the FAD (family functioning), the PRQ85 (social support), and the SAFE scale (acculturative stress). Note that gender had no significant main effects on family functioning, social support, and acculturative stress.

**Relationships Among Predictor Variables and Acculturative Stress**

Pearson correlation coefficients revealed that family dysfunction ( $r = .34, p < .002$ ) and ineffective social support ( $r = -.14, p = .10$ ) were related to high

**Table III.** Multiple Regression of Acculturative Stress among Central American Immigrants\*

Predictor variables	Standardized beta	SE	t
Family functioning	.57****	5.8	4.3
Expectations for the future	.26**	7.7	4.3
Church attendance	-.25*	1.3	-1.9
$R^2 = .42$			

\*Criteria for entering the model was set at  $F \leq .10$ .  
\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .005$ .

levels of acculturative stress. Spearman correlation coefficients revealed that infrequent church attendance ( $r = -.16, p < .10$ ) and low levels of agreement with the decision to migrate ( $r = -.14, p = .10$ ) were related to high levels of acculturative stress. Income, education, perceptions of religiosity, perceived influence of religion, and contribution to the decision to migrate were not significantly related to acculturative stress.

ANOVAs were used to study the effects of expectations for the future, marital status, and family intactness on acculturative stress. The first analysis revealed a significant main effect for expectations for the future ( $F [1,66] = 3.5, p < .04$ ). Those participants who revealed nonpositive expectations reported higher acculturative stress. The second analysis revealed a significant main effect for marital status ( $F [1,68] = 2.5, p < .05$ ). Those participants who were currently married reported higher acculturative stress than those participants who were not currently married. The third analysis revealed no significant main effect for family intactness on acculturative stress.

**Multiple Regression Analysis of Acculturative Stress**

Table III shows a stepwise multiple regression analysis which was conducted to determine the best

**Table II.** Participants' Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on Measures of Family Functioning, Social Support, and Acculturative Stress

Participants	Family functioning		Social support		Acculturative stress	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
All participants	2.31	0.35	120.8	24.3	53.2	15.5
Females	2.35	0.34	120.6	23.9	54.4	14.9
Males	2.15	0.38	121.4	27.0	48.6	17.5

predictors of acculturative stress. Entered into the analysis were each of the predictor variables discussed previously. The criteria for entering the model was set at  $F \leq .10$ . As shown in Table III, the variables that entered the model were family functioning, expectations for the future, and church attendance. These variables accounted for 42% of the variance in acculturative stress.

## DISCUSSION

### Premigration Experiences of Central American Immigrants

The acculturative stress model notes the importance of considering how premigration factors may relate to adaptive functioning after migration. Although premigration experiences were not directly measured in this study, it is important to consider how premigration experiences may influence the acculturative stress experienced by Central American immigrants.

Berry (1) noted the importance of drawing the distinction between "immigrant" status and "refugee" status when assessing levels of acculturative stress among acculturating groups. According to Berry, this distinction is based on the voluntariness of contact with the new country. Generally, refugees may feel pushed from their country of origin, whereas immigrants may be more voluntarily involved in the acculturation process. Using this distinction in defining migrating groups, Central Americans can be considered refugees. The recent sociopolitical climate—for example, civil war and violence, government repression, and the resulting trauma—in Central American countries, such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, has led to increased levels of distress among individuals in these countries. Exposure to premigration trauma among Central Americans may therefore account for greater acculturative stress after migration in comparison to that of immigrants from a country such as Mexico.

Hovey's (17) data on acculturative stress (using the SAFE scale) among Mexican immigrants is therefore relevant for comparison purposes. In comparing these two groups, Central American migrants ( $M = 53.23$ ), as expected, revealed significantly greater levels of acculturative stress than Mexican American migrants ( $M = 49$ ,  $t = 1.8$ ,  $p < .04$ ).

### Psychosocial Predictors of Acculturative Stress

In addition to premigration experiences, many psychosocial factors that are particular to the host environment may account for elevated levels of acculturative stress among some individuals.

The current findings indicated that family dysfunction was strongly associated with greater acculturative stress. This is not surprising because the Latin family is a core characteristic of Latin culture and has traditionally been important in providing emotional support for its members. Several researchers (18, 19) have found that a high level of perceived family support is the most essential and stable dimension of Latin familism. Thus, without the family providing stability and emotional support, a more difficult acculturative experience is expected.

Marriage may provide further emotional support during the acculturative process. Immigrant individuals who are married are more likely to have a confidant for support than those immigrants who are not married (20). Thus, not surprisingly, the current findings indicated that those acculturating individuals who were currently married reported less acculturative stress than those individuals who were not currently married.

The current study measured the perceived effectiveness of social support rather than access to social support networks. Several authors (21–23) observed that larger social networks do not ensure that the support will be of higher quality or more effective, and therefore the perceived quality of social support may be a more accurate predictor of distress than quantity of social support. The current findings indicated that ineffective social support was associated with elevated levels of acculturative stress. This finding thus supports the notion that social support of high quality may help individuals cope during the acculturative process.

Of the three religion variables, church attendance was the strongest predictor of acculturative stress. More frequent church attendance was associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. The strength of church attendance as a predictor, relative to the other religion variables, may be due to the nature of the variable. As noted by Stack (24) and Stack and Wasserman (25), church attendance may reflect how well an individual is tied into a religious group. In other words, church attendance may be an indicator of both the social support derived through the church and the shared beliefs and practices of a religious group. Together these may decrease the

level of acculturative stress that an individual experiences.

According to Williams and Berry (4), attitudes and expectancies toward the acculturative experience may affect individual coping strategies and the ability to adapt, thus affecting the individual level of distress. Those individuals who perceive the acculturative changes as opportunities may experience less acculturative stress than those who do not. The current findings lend support to this notion. Positive expectations for the future were related to lower acculturative stress levels.

In order to share the sense of depth, richness, and individual experience found within the present sample, as well as to portray the differences between those open-ended responses coded as positive and those coded as nonpositive, several examples of individual expectations for the future are given. The first response is positive, as a 68-year-old male described his belief that learning the English language opens the door to a brighter future: "I think that if I study English with the effort that I should give it, the future of my family will be better. I think that by studying you can go further than we think." The next example is a positive response from a 21-year-old female:

Well, I think because we trust in God, everything will be better for me, my family, and . . . people who are important in my life. . . . God never abandons us and He is the only friend who doesn't betray us. That's why I trust in him.

The next set of responses (26) are nonpositive:

For me, because I'm older, I don't think that there will be a future. For my grandchildren, it hurts me to think about their future because of the extremely difficult time that we are experiencing. (70-year-old female)

Only those who are in charge of the law [the lawmakers] know our future, since our opinions are not heard because we are Hispanics. (38-year-old female)

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of this study include its relatively limited sample size, use of a single-informant self-report methodology, and cross-sectional design. Although the distinction was drawn between immigrant status and refugee status, data were not available to fully parse the voluntary and involuntary statuses of individual migration. It may be the case that some Central American migrants did not feel "pushed"

from their country of origin. It may also be the case that migrants from a country such as Mexico were not voluntarily involved in the acculturation process. Future research should therefore obtain such information on an individual basis rather than generalizing from migrants' countries of origin.

The acculturation scale (7) used in this study is a unidimensional measure of acculturation. In other words, it measures acculturation on a linear scale as if it involves a "change" from Latino culture to the mainstream culture. Some authors (3, 27, 28), however, have suggested that acculturation may be more accurately assessed with multidimensional measures that capture the possibility that individuals may be fully integrated into more than one culture. Future research should therefore consider using multidimensional measures when assessing levels of acculturation. The current study assessed religion through the use of three items. Future research should use a more comprehensive measure of religion that is able to distinguish between the social aspects, religious practices, and spiritual dimensions of religion.

Research that further explores the acculturative experiences of Central American immigrants is needed. The homogeneity of the sample in terms of ethnicity and area sampled suggests that the current findings should be generalized with caution. Further research should thus concentrate on increasing this study's generalizability. For example, acculturative stress and its predictors should be explored in other geographical regions, with different ethnic groups, and with other types of acculturating groups (e.g., native peoples). Other factors hypothesized to increase the risk for acculturative stress should be explored, including coping skills, self-esteem, prior knowledge of language and culture of the new society, congruity between contact expectations and actualities, and the sense of loss resulting from the separation of family and friends.

### Clinical Implications

The current findings have implications for the evaluation, intervention, and treatment of migrant individuals. The findings highlight the importance of assessment and treatment within a cultural context. In other words, the initial clinical evaluation should assess the stress relating to acculturation, family and social support, and cognitive attributes such as attitudes and expectations for the future. Furthermore, the roles of these factors, the reasons for the migra-

tion (including possible premigration trauma), the migration experience, and consequent change are issues that should be explored throughout the course of treatment. Aresti (29), Aron (30), and Bowen *et al.* (31) have written in detail about clinical techniques for working with victims of sociopolitical trauma. Finally, it is important to note that each person who encounters difficulties during the acculturative process has a unique history that modulates and defines the parameters of his or her specific problems. Seldom does an individual enter treatment and state that he or she has "problems with acculturative stress" or "psychological problems due to migration."

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