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A Note on the Relationship Between Acculturation and Socioeconomic Status

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Studies investigating the acculturation of Hispanic-Americans often overlook socioeconomic status (SES) as an important correlate with acculturation. This study examined the relationship between acculturation and SES among a group of Mexican-American college students. A significant positive relationship was found between acculturation and SES even when SES was inferred via different indicators. The importance of accounting for SES when examining acculturation is discussed.

Research focusing on the acculturation of Hispanic-Americans is rapidly accumulating in the psychological literature (Keefe & Padilla, 1987). As a result, numerous psychosocial variables have been found to covary with the acculturation level of the subjects under investigation. However, an important correlate of acculturation, socioeconomic status (SES), is frequently unaccounted for in many of these studies (i.e., Keefe, Padilla, & Carlos, 1979; O'Guinn, Imperia, & MacAdams, 1987; Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, Marín, & Pérez-Stable, 1987; Tharp, Meadow, Lennhoff, & Satterfield, 1968; Torres-Matrullo, 1976). Further, when SES has been considered, often it is found to have a stronger effect on the findings than acculturation level per se (i.e., Buriel & Saenz, 1980; Griffith & Villavicencio, 1985; Gutierrez, Sameroff, & Karrer, 1988; Soto, 1983). SES should strongly associate with acculturation level because higher levels of educational attainment and higher incomes should facilitate the penetration into and interaction with mainstream society by Hispanic-Americans and other minorities.

AUTHORS' NOTE: This article is based on a study presented at the 37th annual meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA. Correspondence should be addressed to Charles Negy, Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843.

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In light of this, the purpose of the present study was twofold: First, we attempted to determine the correlation between acculturation and SES for a sample of Mexican-American college students. Secondly, the study sought to ascertain the strongest relationship between acculturation and SES when the subjects' SES was inferred from each parent separately and when SES was inferred by whichever parent (father or mother) had the highest SES as determined by occupation and educational level (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958). The Hollingshead method of determining SES may be somewhat antiquated because the status ascribed to some occupations may have shifted over the decades. Nevertheless, for the present study, it sufficiently served the purpose of illustrating the relationship between the two variables of interest.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 339 Mexican-American introductory psychology students (151 males, 186 females) attending a public university in the state of Texas. Their mean age was 20.34 ($SD = 2.74$). All subjects participated to partially satisfy a course requirement.

Procedure

All subjects filled out a single page requesting the following demographic information: sex, age, ethnic identity, generation level, marital status, religious preference, job title and description of the father's and mother's occupation, and highest level of education attained by the father and mother. These last two items on this page provided the information necessary to determine SES based on the Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Position.

Additionally, the subjects filled out the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans (ARSMA; Cuellar, Harris, & Jasso, 1980). This is a 20-item scale, with each item being assigned a value ranging from 1 (*very Mexican*) to 5 (*very Anglicized*). It was scored in accordance with Cuellar et al. (1980). Thus a high score indicates that the individual is relatively more acculturated, and a low score indicates that the individual is relatively unacculturated. As Cuellar et al. (1980) pointed out, the ARSMA obviously cannot tap all the components of acculturation, because acculturation is a multifaceted phenomenon composed of numerous dimensions. Nevertheless, a factor analysis showed that it identifies the following four factors: (a)

language familiarity, usage, and preference; (b) ethnic identity and generation; (c) reading, writing, and cultural exposure; and (d) ethnic interaction. Further, it was found to have an internal reliability of .88 as measured by coefficient alpha, and a test-retest reliability (one month apart) of .80. The scale has been validated in several studies and has been widely used in acculturation research (for more information regarding the validation of the ARSMA, see Cuellar et al., 1980).

Results

As expected, acculturation strongly correlated with SES when the subject's SES was inferred from: (a) the parent with the highest SES ($r [337] = .44, p = .0001$); (b) the father's SES ($r [337] = .40, p = .0001$); and (c) the mother's SES ($r [337] = .35, p = .0001$). The r values were converted to z scores in order to determine whether differences between the correlation coefficients were statistically significant. No difference was significant at the .05 level. Moreover, when males and females were considered separately the results yielded similar findings.

Conclusion

The results of this study revealed a significant positive relationship between acculturation level and SES, suggesting that the more acculturated subjects come from backgrounds with higher standards of living and better educated parents. Caution should be taken, however, to be aware of a "chicken-and-egg" problem in interpretation. It remains unclear whether being more acculturated facilitates penetration into the mainstream—which would result in better living standards and education—or whether higher socioeconomic status facilitates becoming more acculturated. Naturally, these two possibilities could be simultaneously influential.

Viewed from the perspective of contemporary theory, this relationship may be most easily conceptualized within the multidimensional model of acculturation as discussed by Keefe and Padilla (1987). Using Ramirez' (1967) value-focused formulation as one example, some values believed intrinsic to acculturation may be more strongly related to SES than others. Thus there are rich potential theoretical implications of the present results amenable to further empirical study.

These results strongly suggest that acculturation and SES are intricately intertwined. Acculturation is, in all probability, a valid construct and is worthy of continued investigation. However, it is imperative that research

involving acculturation account for SES in order to clarify the specific influences of the two constructs in any given data set (see Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991).

Moreover, when studies discover differences between Hispanic-Americans and Anglo-Americans on psychosocial constructs (i.e., cognitive styles, family values, personality traits, etc.) it is conceivable that these differences may be based more on, or at least partially on, differences in SES rather than in ethnicity alone, furthering the argument for the consideration of SES.

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