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*Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 1994; 16; 116

DOI: 10.1177/07399863940162002

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# Acculturative Stress: Minority Status and Distress

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*The process of acculturative stress is examined in a survey of 177 Hispanic and 93 Anglo freshman college students. A multivariate framework is proposed that includes social class, gender, and ethnicity as precursor variables; demographic and psychological indexes of acculturation; college role stresses experienced by most students; and minority stresses especially relevant to ethnic students as predictors of psychological distress. Social class and ethnicity exert significant effects on college role stresses but not on minority stresses. Level of acculturation is associated with reports of higher levels of minority stress, but it is not significantly associated with psychological distress. However, minority stresses add significant information to the level of psychological distress beyond that accounted by precursor and college role stresses alone. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for longitudinal studies that allow for the examination of causal relationships.*

College can be stressful, especially if a student is Hispanic or other ethnic minority. Hispanics comprise only a small percentage of the total enrollment in higher education and are at risk for higher rates of attrition (McCool, 1984). Further, Hispanic students have experienced poorer academic performance and higher rates of psychological distress when compared to their White peers (Cope & Hannah, 1975; Munoz & Garcia-Bahne, 1978; Powers, 1984; Rugg, 1982; Vasquez, 1978).

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1989 APA Annual Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana, as part of the symposium At What Price Success: Stress Processes Among Minority College Students. It is based on a doctoral dissertation (UCLA, 1988), and was supported in part by a dissertation-year grant from Sigma Xi and the Graduate Advancement Program, UCLA. I thank Hector Myers and Shelly Prillerman for their review of an earlier draft of this article. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Delia H. Saldaña, Department of Psychiatry, University of Texas, Health Science Center, 7703 Floyd Curl Drive, San Antonio, TX 78284.

Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 16 No. 2, May 1994 116-128  
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Among those reported to be at greatest risk for high levels of stress are Hispanics who are first-generation students (Billson & Terry, 1982), or who have had interruptions in college attendance (Luther & Dukes, 1982). In addition, financial restrictions (Blackwell, 1978; Brown, Rosen, Hill & Olivas, 1980), being male (Munoz & Garcia-Bahne, 1978), and language difficulties (Brown et al., 1980) have also been associated with negative academic outcomes.

Conceptual and methodological limitations hamper many of the studies done to date. First, most have been based on correlational designs that fail to address the multiple, interactive nature of factors that impact college functioning. Second, many rely on demographic or background variables to predict functioning in the university setting. Relatively little attention has been given to college-related stresses or ways of coping which are more proximal to the university experience, and potentially of greater relevance to attrition risk or psychological distress among Hispanic students. Third, little is known about the nature of stresses experienced by Hispanics that are common to all college students versus those that are more relevant to minority status.

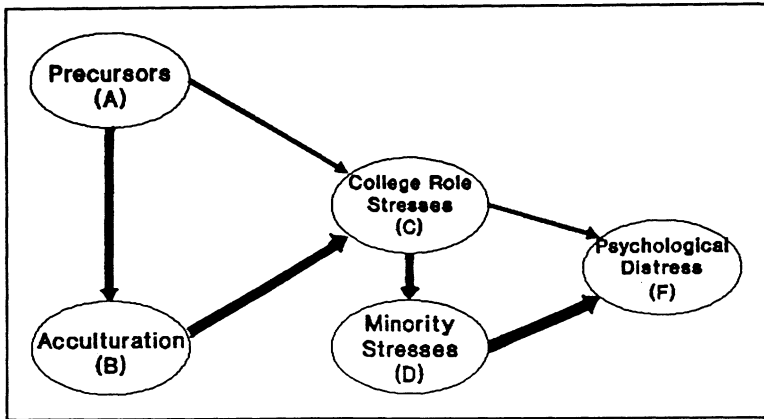
Finally, few findings address the heterogeneity of cultural affiliation and class membership among Hispanic university students. Mixed evidence has emerged about the role of ethnic identity that reflects one's level of cultural awareness, group loyalty, and saliency of values perceived as different than those of the dominant group (Clark, Kaufman, & Pierce, 1976; Padilla, 1980). Although some have asserted that middle-class social and cultural orientation is linked with better academic performance (Oliver, Rodriguez & Mickelson, 1985), others have reported that bicultural affiliation is associated with less stress and better psychosocial adjustment (Fernández-Barillas & Morrison, 1984). However, little distinction has been made between an individual's ethnicity (particular ethnic group membership), versus potentially stressful aspects of his/her ethnic *identity* in the context of different situations.

Little research has addressed the relationship of ethnic identity to level of acculturation, and these two constructs are often treated synonymously. Yet the literature on acculturation has focused primarily on variables that are often associated with demographic or social class descriptors (generation level in the United States, language preference, bilingual fluency). In contrast, ethnic identity may more accurately reflect *internal* factors associated with level of acculturation (e.g., cognitive awareness, values, and loyalty to ethnic group membership). Both of these constructs should be separated from realistically based environmental pressures (e.g., within-ethnic group ten-

sions, interactions with nonethnic group tensions, interactions with nonethnic individuals, and real or perceived discrimination) that reflect enduring social status marked by minority group membership.

Ongoing stress has been identified as an important determinant of general level of stress (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Investigations of ongoing stress have identified four major categories: daily hassles, chronic unresolved stress, role strains, and stressful transitions. The persistence and proximity of chronic, unresolved stressors has led to the view that they are powerful predictors of psychological distress. Pearlin, in particular, has elaborated on the manner in which role strains cause stress for the individual by creating tension or conflict between the obligations and expectations associated with one role versus another (Pearlin, 1983; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Further, Pearlin (1983) emphasizes a normative influence of stress associated with role strain, referring to this phenomena as "the hardships, challenges, and conflicts . . . that people experience as they engage over time in normal social roles" (p. 8). The concept of role strains is a particularly attractive one because it acknowledges the context in which stress occurs.

The few studies (e.g., Patterson, Sedlacek, & Perry, 1984; Oliver et al., 1985) that compare perceptions and reactions among different groups of minority students indicate that both qualitative and quantitative differences exist. Nevertheless, a clear integrative framework that ties together findings from the various studies has only recently emerged. Prillerman, Myers, and Smedley (1989) proposed a theoretical paradigm that helps account for potential interactions between various individual and situational processes impacting Black students. Their underlying premise is that a person-environment *transaction* is a more appropriate model for an accurate understanding of the functioning of minority students on White campuses, rather than the traditional emphasis on individual intellectual and academic factors associated with success and failure. Others (Myers, 1982; Cervantes & Castro, 1985) have also suggested that a stress, coping, and adaptation model is conceptually suited for research with ethnic minority populations in positions of vulnerability. This study explores the applicability of a multivariate, transactional framework to understand the experiences and outcomes of Hispanic students at a predominantly White university (see Figure 1). This task was approached with three main objectives: (a) to delineate factors that enhance the understanding of ethnic identity as it relates to acculturation; (b) to clarify the nature of acculturative stress: that is, stresses that appear more relevant to Hispanic minority status rather than which are similar to those experienced by non-Hispanic White students, and (c) to frame the relevance



A → F  
ROLE STRAIN STRESS:

Paths in the stress process applicable to all student populations.

A → F  
ACCULTURATIVE STRESS:

Paths in the stress process applicable to Hispanic students.

**Figure 1. Predictive pathways of psychological distress in Hispanic students at a predominantly Anglo university.**

Note: Residual arrows have been omitted for visual clarity.

of ethnicity and acculturative stress in terms of their impact on stresses and psychological distress in a university setting.

## Method

### *Sample*

Subjects for this study were a subset ( $N = 270$ ) of respondents to a survey during 1986-1987 of 464 freshman (102 African-American, 93 Anglo, 90 Asian, 177 Hispanic, and 3 Native American) at a large university in the western United States. Subjects were polled at the beginning and end of their

freshman year about college-related stresses and coping behaviors as predictors of psychological and academic outcomes. Subjects were fairly evenly distributed on social class, primarily (64%-67%) female, and Hispanic subjects were mostly (80%) Chicano rather than from another Hispanic subgroup.

### *Measures*

*Precursor variables.* Information was obtained on social class, gender, and ethnicity. For social class, data was obtained about parents' level of education and occupation, and an SES index was calculated that reflected both components (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958). Gender was coded for all subjects and entered as a dummy variable for analysis in regression equations. Ethnicity was determined by asking subjects to identify themselves as "Mexican American or Chicano" (1), "Other Latino" (2), "Caucasian" (3), or "Other," which included mixed ethnic background (4). For the purposes of the present analyses, we combined all Hispanic respondents into one category to compare with Anglos and excluded subjects indicating an ethnic status of "Other."

*Level of acculturation.* A 23-item Cultural Information Scale (CIS; Saldaña, 1988) was developed to measure transitions in ethnic identity due to demographic and psychological factors. Four items, based on an acculturation scale showing good reliability on other Chicano samples (Cuellar, Harris, & Jasso, 1980), comprised the Demographic Index (DI): generation level in the United States, current language preference, fluency in Spanish, and ethnicity of childhood friends. Psychological Index (PI) items were based on dimensions identified previously in the literature (Clark et al., 1976; Padilla, 1980) but not incorporated into current measures of acculturation.

Factor analytic procedures of all items from DI and PI yielded a four-factor solution that accounted for 58.4% of the variance in level of acculturation. These were: Behavioral Preferences, which indicated choice of language for books and magazines, TV programs, and music, and ethnicity of close friends and romantic partners; Cultural Integration, measuring involvement in culturally relevant family observations, community or city cultural celebrations, religious ceremonies, and civic or political activities; Ethnic Loyalty, items rating the personal and familial importance of pride and participation in cultural activities; and Demographic Descriptors, which asked for preferred ethnic identity label, fluency in Spanish, generation level, and language preference. Internal consistency of the scales ranged from .83 to .36. (See Appendix A.)

*College role stresses.* Current concerns included 10 potentially stressful contexts: academics, finances, friendships, family, romance, adjusting to college, health, neighborhood or dormitory life, being a minority, and personal. Specific items were not listed under each context; rather, subjects were simply instructed to rate on a 4-point scale how much of a problem each context was for them, and how important they considered it to be. In addition, each subject identified the most stressful problem area, and rated it on a 5-point scale ranging from *extremely stressful* (5) to *not stressful at all* (1). The “being a minority” item was deleted for nonethnic students.

*Minority status stresses.* Items in this measure refer to stressful experiences and perceptions of the university that may be particularly relevant to ethnic minority status. A 33-item scale was based on issues identified in previous student stress scales (Edmonds, 1984; Zitzow, 1982). An orthogonal varimax rotated factor matrix yielded five scales that together accounted for 33% of the variance in total stress attributed to minority status: academic concerns (46% of shared variance), conflicts between ethnic minority and nonminorities on campus (18%), discrimination (15%), within-ethnic group stresses (12%), and individual preparation concerns (9%). Examples of items included “Maintaining my ethnic identity while attending [university],” “Others lacking respect for people of my ethnic group,” “People close to me thinking that I’m acting ‘White,’ ” and “Doubting my ability to succeed in college.” (See Appendix B.)

Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from *extremely stressful* (5) to *not stressful at all* (1), and including *does not apply to me* (0). A total score indicating total level of stress attributed to minority concerns was obtained, as well as individual scores for each of the five domains identified above.

*Psychological distress.* The Hopkins Symptom Checklist (Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974) is a 58-item self-report symptom rating scale that identifies the frequency of physical and psychological symptoms experienced over the past 3 months. Ratings were made on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very often* (4). This measure has been used extensively in epidemiological studies and is especially relevant to investigations of the relationship between stress and psychological functioning (Burks & Martin, 1985; Cohen et al., 1982). Its advantages include sensitivity to the low levels of symptoms found in normal populations (Uhlenhuth, Lipman, Balter, & Stern, 1974), as well as to changes in symptoms over time (Derogatis et al., 1974). The total score on the index of symptoms was used.

## Results

Findings support hypotheses about the importance of including ethnically relevant measures of identity and stress in understanding the psychological functioning of Hispanic students at a White university.

The first set of analyses addressed the independent contribution of precursor variables (SES, ethnicity, gender) to type of stress reported by our subjects. Two stepwise multiple regression analyses were used to test for the independent contribution of each precursor variable on college role strains common to all students and on minority stresses (see Table 1). Both SES and ethnicity exerted significant negative effects on college role stresses, indicating that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority status reported higher levels of role strain stress. SES again evidenced a significant negative effect on minority stresses. However, gender had no significant direct effects on either type of college-related stress.

Second, I examined whether level of acculturation (LA) added significant information to the two types of stress being considered. Two multiple regression analyses using forced entry of sets of variables were used to first test for the effects of LA on college role stress following entry of precursor variables and then for these effects on minority stresses. Table 2 illustrates that the psychology index of LA varied somewhat depending on type of stress studied, being more associated with minority stresses than with college stresses experienced by most students. However, acculturation does not account for a significant proportion of either type of stress, explaining only 4.9% of the variance in college role stress and 1.1% of the variance in minority stresses.

The third area of inquiry addressed the issue of college-related stresses common to all university students (role strains) versus those that were more relevant to Hispanics (minority status stresses). Of special interest was clarifying whether knowledge about minority stresses would significantly increase the amount of explained variance in psychological distress (PD). As seen in Table 3, multiple regression analyses using forced entry of sets of variables were used to assess incremental productivity.

The pathway predictive of psychological distress in all students included precursor variables and college role strains in a multiple regression analysis. Although no support for a significant effect of precursor variables on PD was found, the addition of college role strains provided a substantial (27%) increase in the amount of explained variance in PD.

Next, the pathway common to all students was compared to that relevant for Hispanics. Once again, a multiple regression analysis was used to account for the effects of precursors, level of acculturation, college role strains, and



**Table 1. Contribution of Precursors to College Role and Minority Stresses**

Variable	Beta	Adj $R^2$	Inc. in $F$
Contribution of precursors to college role stresses ( $N = 270$ )			
SES	-.150	.019	6.14**
Ethnicity	-.137	.030	4.12*
Gender	.061	.030	1.04
Total $F^2 = 7.90$ , $F_{(3, 266)} = 3.789^{**}$			
Contribution of precursors to minority stresses ( $N = 176$ )			
SES	-.191	.031	6.65
Gender	.037	.027	.25
Total $F^2 = 5.80$ , $F_{(3, 173)} = 2.280$ (n.s.)			

\* $p = .05$ ; \*\* $p = .01$ ; \*\*\* $p = .001$ .

**Table 2. Incremental Contribution of Level of Acculturation to Precursors as a Predictor of Stress**

Variable	Beta	Adj $R^2$	Inc. in $F$
Criterion: College role stress (accounts for a total of 4.9% variance)			
SES	-.150		
Gender	-.137	.030	3.71*
Acculturation			
Demographic	-.145	.044	3.61*
Psychological	-.030	.039	.11
Criterion: Minority stresses (account for a total of 1.08% variance)			
SES	-.191		
Gender	.037	.038	3.45*
Acculturation			
Demographic	-.177	.051	5.44*
Psychological	-.295	.108	12.00***

\* $p = .05$ ; \*\* $p = .01$ ; \*\*\* $p = .001$ .

minority status stresses on psychological distress. Both precursor and acculturation variables failed to exert significant effects on PD. However, minority status stresses significantly increased the amount of explained variance in PD by 8.25%, even after accounting for the substantial effects provided by college role strains.

**Table 3. Stress and Psychological Distress**

Variable	Beta	Adj $R^2$	Inc. in $F$
<b>I. Common to all university students (<math>N = 269</math>)</b>			
Ethnicity			
SES		.007	1.59
Gender			
College role strains	.524	.271	97.50***
Total $F^2 = 27.80$ , $F_{(4,265)} = 26.00$ ***			
<b>II. Relevant to Hispanic Students at a White University (<math>N = 176</math>)</b>			
Ethnicity			
SES		.007	1.59
Gender			
Acculturation			
Demographic			
Psychological		.014	1.86
College role strains	.318	.271	97.50***
Minority stresses	.325	.083	19.61***
Total $F^2 = 37.50$ , $F_{(6,170)} = 11.25$ ***			

## Discussion

The conceptual model articulated in this article provides a promising entry into a more effective understanding of the nature of stresses faced by Hispanic students at a predominantly Anglo university. Previous work in this area is enhanced by clarifying the dimensions of acculturation to include psychological indexes relevant to ethnic identity as well as demographic factors associated with traditional measures of acculturation. This distinction becomes even more important when one considers the relationship of ethnic identity and acculturation level to a stress process that is contextually based (e.g., being a minority college student). This work indicates that the level of acculturation provides important information about the level of minority status stress reported by students but is less relevant in terms of their psychological distress. This preliminary evidence suggests that acculturative stress may be distinct from outcome measures of psychological functioning.

Second, the model proposed addresses the relative association of precursor variables (social class, gender, ethnicity), level of acculturation, stresses common to all students (role strains), and minority status stresses to psychological distress. Delineation of variables into these various sets provides

helpful distinctions at different levels. For example, the role of ethnicity and social class can be compared, as well as the relationship between ethnicity (ethnic group membership) and ethnic identity (psychological factor within level of acculturation). In addition, the relevance of these variables to predispose an individual for certain levels of stress can be investigated. Findings indicate that the relevance of social class, ethnicity, and acculturation vary, depending on the criterion selected. In particular, although demographic indexes used in traditional measures of acculturation appear relevant to college role strains common to all students, it is the psychological index associated with increased ethnic identity that seems to be more associated with the levels of *minority* status stresses reported.

Finally, this work suggests benefits of including ethnically relevant factors in predictive models that address the functioning of minority students at a predominantly Anglo university. A substantial increase in accounting for psychological distress was gained by the inclusion of minority status stresses, even after having controlled for the potent effects of college role strains.

The limitations of a cross-sectional design preclude adequate testing of causal relationships in the current study. However, results suggest that a multivariate model such as that proposed here may be of special significance in understanding the process of acculturative stress in an undergraduate population. For Hispanics, this implies the relevance of acculturative stress as a dynamic process separate from purely descriptive variables such as ethnicity or social class. Rather, ethnicity, social class, and level of acculturation may serve as risk indexes that mark the Hispanic student's predisposition for higher levels of minority status stresses. This *process* of acculturative stress then appears to be associated with a substantially greater level of psychological distress. These results are expected to serve as an important foundation for future development in this area.

## Appendix A

### Level of Acculturation: Factor Structure

Scales and Items	Factor Loading
Psychological Index: (accounts for 52.1% of variance)	
Factor 1. Behavioral Preferences (5 items, alpha = .83)	
Books and magazines	.86
Television programs	.78
Music	.75
Dating partner	.68
Close friends	.63

<b>Factor 2. Cultural Integration (5 items, alpha = .78)</b>	
Community/citywide celebrations	.78
Family observations	.71
Religious celebrations	.70
Civic or political activities	.61
Peer ethnic preference	.41
<b>Factor 3. Ethnic Loyalty (9 items, alpha = .81)</b>	
Importance of identifying cultural heritage	.81
Importance of bilingualism	.64
Importance of cultural pride	.62
Importance of participating in cultural activities	.42
<b>Demographic Index: (accounts for 6.3% of variance) (4 items, alpha = .36)</b>	
Ethnic identity label	.76
Fluency in Spanish	.76
Generation level	.58
Language preference	.57

**Appendix B**  
**Minority Student Stressors Factor Analysis**  
**(factor solution accounts for 33% of the variance)**

Scale and Item	Factor Loading
<b>Scale 1: Academic concerns (alpha = .93)</b>	
Not enough professors of my ethnic group	.79
Few students of my ethnic group in my classes	.77
Racist policies and practices of the university	.76
University lacking concern and support for the needs of students of my ethnic group	.68
Few courses involving issues relevant to my ethnic group	.66
Seeing members of my ethnic group doing low-status jobs and Anglos in high-status jobs	.65
Attitudes/treatment of faculty toward students of my ethnic group	.58
Anglo student and faculty expecting poor academic performance from students of my ethnic group	.56
Tense relationships between Anglos and minorities at this university	.53
Pressure that what "I" do is representative of my ethnic group's abilities, behavior, etc.	.45
<b>Scale 2: Ethnic-nonethnic group concerns (alpha = .84)</b>	
Having Anglo friends	.70
Relationships between different ethnic groups	.69
Anglo-oriented campus culture	.62
Lack of unity/supportiveness among members of my ethnic group at this university	.48
Having to live around mostly Anglo people	.48

Having to always be aware of what Anglo people might do	.44
Maintaining my ethnic identity while attending this university	.44
Relationships between males and females of my ethnic group (available dating partners)	.40
Wealthy campus culture	.34
This campus being an unfriendly place	.32
Scale 3: Discrimination concerns (alpha = .86)	
Being treated rudely or unfairly because of my ethnicity	.90
Being discriminated against	.73
Anglo people expecting my to be a certain way because of my ethnicity (stereotyping)	.59
Others lacking respect for people of my ethnic group	.47
Having to "prove" my abilities to others (e.g., work twice as hard)	.36

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