



policy brief

Acculturation and life satisfaction among Mexican immigrants

As large numbers of immigrants settle in the Southwest, few questions are more timely – or more hotly debated – than how they can best adjust to their adopted country. One view insists they must shed their birth culture and become “110% American.” Another argues the opposite that immigrants should cling tightly to their home-country culture and avoid absorption into mainstream America.

The right answer, it seems, is neither. And both.

Immigration and acculturation can be difficult. The challenges of leaving home and navigating a new culture may impose stresses on individuals and families, downgrade their quality of life and could even exacerbate mental health disorders.

The most effective response remains in dispute, with various studies emphasizing both integration and separation. This lack of consensus suggests that neither high levels nor low levels of acculturation necessarily mitigate immigrants’ distress.

In fact, the research findings reported in this article support the view that immigrants who have been able to integrate aspects of both the host culture and the culture of origin – who are, in other words, bicultural – have better mental health outcomes and less depression than those who remain culturally separate or integrate without maintaining some connection to their culture of origin. Multiculturalism seems to best promote immigrants’ life satisfaction and resilience.

The study examined the impact of acculturation and family bonds on reported life satisfaction and resilience among 307 Mexican-Americans – most of them immigrants – living in the Southwest. The study’s central concepts (see boxes) were “life satisfaction,” or happiness; “resilience,” the ability to recover following stressful events; and “*familismo*,” the tradition of close family ties and support.

Participants’ level of acculturation was measured by determining which languages they use in speaking, reading, watching TV and listening to the radio. Their level of *familismo* was based on their responses to questions concerning the importance of family history and traditions.

Among the results:

- Taking in to account age, gender, education and marital status, the study found a significant increase over four years in **life satisfaction** for individuals who are bilingual/bicultural, compared to those who are primarily Spanish-speaking/low acculturated.
- No significant difference in **life satisfaction** was found for individuals who primarily speak English.
- Both culturally integrated (bilingual) participants and assimilated (primarily English speaking) participants reported higher rates of **resilience** than their primarily Spanish speaking counterparts.
- A positive relationship was also found between **familismo** and both resilience and life satisfaction.

Promoting optimal physical and mental health among America's large and growing immigrant population is a crucial social concern. A common mainstream society's response encourages complete assimilation into the dominant culture. However, this study indicates that, while immigrants must acquire new skills in order to navigate a new culture, these skills need not be obtained at the expense of an individual's culture of origin.

Immigration and acculturation may present individual challenges. But a bicultural orientation and an endorsement of traditional family norms show promise for easing stress and promoting positive outcomes for both new immigrants and the society they are joining.

These findings suggest that policymakers should resist what pressures may exist to promote either strict assimilation or separation. Contrary to widespread belief, neither of these paths appears to optimize life satisfaction and resiliency among recent immigrants. Instead, practitioners and policymakers could provide greater support through advocacy, policy, and practice – working with schools, community groups, immigrant organizations, community colleges, healthcare centers and faith-based institutions – that allow immigrants to remain rooted in their home language and *familismo* traditions while also adapting to American culture and acquiring English and other skills necessary to thrive in their adopted society.

Resilience: The ability to bounce back in the face of stressful life events. Resilient individuals have a strong commitment to self, are willing to take action to deal with problems, have a positive attitude toward their environment, and have a strong sense of purpose.

Life Satisfaction: An individual's ability to be happy and to have a life that meets their needs. Associated with stable marriages, self-efficacy, goal orientation, work ethic and positive intra- and interpersonal outcomes, it has a buffering effect against stressful life events and externalizing behavior in adolescents, and acts as a protective factor against the development of more serious mental-health challenges.

Familismo: Cultural norms of loyalty, solidarity and reciprocity with both the nuclear and extended family. These are taught in the family and serve as a source of resilience. The social support and sense of belonging that result from being a part of a close family are protective against negative mental health outcomes.

The data in this study (n=307 adults) come from a four-year randomized control trial testing Families Preparing the New Generation (FPNG), a parenting intervention developed to accompany keepin' it REAL (KiR). KiR is a culturally-based evidence-based substance-use prevention program for youth, recognized as a National Model Program by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

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