

CULTURAL AND ACCULTURATION DIFFERENCES REGARDING DISTRESS
SURROUNDING PARENTAL DIVORCE

By

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Abstract

This study examines the long-term subclinical effects of divorce on Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults of various levels of acculturation to the majority culture in the United States and their relationships with each of their parents. University students from married and divorced families completed surveys that included the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ), the Painful Feelings About Divorce scale (PFAD), and free-response questions about their relationships with and attitudes towards their mother and father. Multivariate and univariate ANOVA's were run to determine if there was a significant difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults on subclinical distress after divorce and attitudes towards parental relationships. Multiple and linear regressions were run to determine if acculturation level was a predictor for subclinical distress or positive/negative affect words used in the free-response questions. One significant effect was found of acculturation levels on positive affect words used when describing parental relationships—participants who were more acculturated to United States culture used more positive affect words when describing their parental relationships. Attributes of collectivist cultures are used to explain these results.

Keywords: Acculturation, Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, parental divorce

Cultural and Acculturation Differences Regarding Distress Surrounding Parental Divorce

Hundreds of thousands of couples in America get divorced every year (Schoen, 2016). Many of these couples have children and young adults who are then impacted, sometimes severely, by the fluctuating and often tumultuous new conditions of their families. Many studies have been conducted concerning the effects of divorce on these children (Amato, 2000; Schwartz & Finley, 2009; Bussell, 1996). Of equal importance are young adults and several studies have been conducted concerning the long-term effects of a parental divorce on children as they develop into adulthood (Amato, 2000; Eldar-Avidan, Haj-Yahia, & Greenboam, 2009; Størksen, Røysamb, Moum, & Tambs, 2005).

In general, children and young adults from divorced families report experiencing higher levels of emotional distress and other negative consequences such as problems in academic performance and in peer and romantic (Amato, 2000; Størksen et. al, 2005; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Finley & Schwartz, 2010). The “divided world of the child,” or the divided familial structure that is often created by parental divorce, is associated with a lower overall level of parental nurturance, which is in turn associated with poorer academic performance, lower satisfaction in friendships, and higher levels of relationship problems (Finley & Schwartz, 2010). Without considering parental nurturance, parental divorce alone was found to be associated with school problems in both adolescent boys and girls (Størksen et. al, 2005). Additionally, there are changes in the parent-young adult relationships and these changes can be different for each parent (Finley & Schwartz, 2010; Eldar-Avidan et. al, 2009; Schwartz & Finley, 2009). After a parental divorce, a child or young adult’s family dynamic is heavily altered, in particular in relationships with mothers and fathers (Schwartz & Finley, 2009; Finley & Schwartz, 2010). Based on these differences and which parent the child or young adult is primarily living with,

levels of distress and feelings towards each parent vary (Eldar-Avidan et. al, 2009; Finley & Schwartz, 2010).

Studies regarding divorce in collectivist cultures have shown that divorce is significantly less common or normalized in cultures with more collectivist values than in cultures with more individualist values. This is due to a more prevalent sense of duty to one's family and a greater social obligation to the collective as opposed to the individual (Triandis, 2018). Therefore, divorce in generally collectivist cultures could be more disruptive.

Less studied are young adults and parents after a parental divorce from different ethnicities. Most of the research regarding non-White families was conducted in the 1980's and 1990's with African American children and young adults (Phillips & Alcebo, 1986; Bussell, 1996; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Smith, 1997; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). The results indicate the effects of a parental divorce on African American children and young adults as compared to White children and young adults are mixed. While African American students have a much higher rate of dropping out of school when they from divorced families (Teachman et. al, 1996; Bussell, 1996), some studies show that White children may actually be more negatively impacted emotionally. One hypothesized explanation is that African American children grow up in families with a higher rate of poverty and other adverse childhood experiences (e.g., violence, hunger, or need) (Duncan & Rodgers, 1988); thus, the parental divorce is likely not the primary or most defining stressful event of their childhood as was the case for some upper middle class White young adult college students (Laumann-Billings, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Smith, 1997).

In general, there is a lack of recent research on children from divorced families as they develop into young adults in that most of the studies in this area were conducted in the 1980's-

1990's (Phillips & Alcebo, 1986; Bussell, 1996; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Smith, 1997; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). Additionally, there is little to no research on the effect of a parental divorce on non-White Hispanic young adults and their respective feelings toward their mothers and fathers post-divorce. Perhaps the same results found in studies regarding less distress for African American children and young adults (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Smith, 1997) would hold for the non-White Hispanic young adult population but this hypothesis has yet to be tested.

There are studies of young adults and adolescents whose parents had divorced using samples from countries such as Norway and Israel (Størksen et. al, 2005; Eldar-Avidan et. al, 2009), which found that adolescents who had experienced a parental divorce in these countries also experienced more frequent problems in school (Størksen, et. al, 2005) and attributed their own attitudes regarding relationships and intimacy to their parental divorce (Eldar-Avidan et. al, 2009). However, there are very few studies using Hispanic or Hispanic American young adult samples, especially those in the United States. Hispanic groups are important in that they form a large and growing demographic in the United States (DuBard & Gizlice, 2008). Currently those identifying as Hispanic make up 17% of the United States' population and it is projected to increase to 29% by 2060 (Pew Research Center, 2015). It is essential to understand more about their experiences so that, if needed, we can develop targeted interventions to address the issues for this population. Depending on the country of decent and level of acculturation, there may be ethnic-based parenting style differences as compare to White parenting styles, which could lead to differences experienced by children and young adults from Hispanic and Hispanic American families (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994; Varela et. al, 2004; Huang, Caughy, Genevro, & Miller, 2005). Also, level of acculturation of the young adult may differ from the level of

acculturation of the parent, which could relate to harmony in the family structure and receptiveness of the young adult to parenting practice (Knight, Virdin, & Roosa, 1994; Parke & Buriel, 1998; Brunsa, 2005). Levels of acculturation between family members may affect family functioning, familiar norms, and expectations of family members, which are all possibilities for parent-young adult conflict. Reactions to a parental divorce among individuals with different ethnicities or levels of acculturation may vary. Additionally, individuals may have different general feelings towards their mother or father, respectively, that are influenced by their culture and how much of their culture they still actively practice.

Writing can be used as a valid way to study feelings held by a person and college students and adults have been found to readily and accurately disclose personal or emotional information in writing (Pennebaker, 1989). The Language and Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) is a computerized program that uses objective analysis and categorization of word usage to examine written samples in terms of emotion (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). A study has found that the LIWC does this accurately and can therefore be used as a valid tool to examine emotion through writing (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001).

This study focuses on young adults and examines how the differences in ethnicity and acculturation affect emotional distress, especially those concerning parent-young adult relationships after a parental divorce. This study has implications for treatment of young adults from divorced families who are currently receiving or in need of treatment. Emotional distress, as opposed to clinical disorders, is often overlooked by researchers and peers because typical screenings focus on clinical disorders such as depression and anxiety (Kelly, 2000). However, subclinical emotional distress was found present in samples of both upper middle class White college students and lower socioeconomic samples of African American young adult boys

(Laumann-Billings, 2000; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Schwartz & Finley, 2010). This subclinical emotional distress may be present and relevant to an individual's life and well-being. Discovering how young adults from different cultures experience distress in relation to a parental divorce can help inform targets for treatment. Additionally, this study will provide further insight post-divorce relationships between Hispanic American parents and young adults. Many feelings and perspectives of people today are heavily impacted by their culture and their family's culture; therefore, it is essential to recognize the diversity of the United States and the implications of this diversity on family life.

The four research questions that will be addressed are as follows:

- 1) Do Hispanic young adults from married and divorced families differ from non-Hispanic White young adults from married and divorced families on the number of positive and negative affect words used when describing their relationship with their parents?
- 2) Do young adults from married and divorced families differ on the number of positive and negative affect words used when describing their parents based on their level of acculturation?
- 3) Are there differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults on reported levels of emotional distress related to a parental divorce?
- 4) Do Hispanic young adults' reported levels of emotional distress related to a parental divorce vary based on their level of acculturation?

Methods

Participants

In the current study, 574 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large Southwestern university completed surveys between 2002 and 2004 based on parental marital status. Four hundred and twenty-nine (74.7%) participants were female and 145 (25.3%) were male. A majority (96.7%) of participants were between the ages of 18 and 22. Approximately half (57.6%) reported an annual household income of more than \$65,000 and only 6.3% reported an income of less than \$15,000 a year. Most of the participants identified as either Hispanic (22.0%) or Non-Hispanic White (70.4%). Four hundred and three participants were from divorced families (70.2%) and 171 (29.8%) reported that their parents were still married. See Table 1 for more detailed demographics.

Measures

Ethnicity was measured by combining all participants who identified as Spanish, Spanish American, Chilean, Mexican, Mexican American, Central American, Hispanic, Hispanic American, Panamanian, Peruvian, El Salvadorian, or South American (with the exception of Brazilian) as Hispanic. This broadly-encompassing operationalization of Hispanic resulted from the United States Census designation of the term and the age of the data. Because the survey was developed in 2009, it was the social and statistical norm to refer to all Spanish-speaking peoples as Hispanic. Since it uses the terms “Hispanic” and “Hispanic American,” there is no way to tell which culture participants identify with when they identify as one of these terms. Therefore, it was practical to include all Spanish-speaking cultures as Hispanic. See Table 2 for more information. Participants who identified as Caucasian or White but not Hispanic were categorized as non-Hispanic White.

Acculturation was measured using the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ) – American Version (Abridged) (Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). The Abridged Version of the GEQ is

made up of 37 questions, some of which address acculturation and some of which address language use (for this study, English use was the focus). Example questions include, “I am embarrassed by American culture,” and “At home, I watch TV in English.” Questions are scored on a five-point Likert scale and some questions were reverse-scored to align higher scores with higher levels of acculturation.

The Painful Feelings About Divorce scale (PFAD) (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000) is a 40-question survey that measures subclinical emotional distress related to parental relationships in individuals from both married and divorced families. The PFAD has six subscales: Paternal Blame, Maternal Blame, Self-Blame, Loss and Abandonment, Filter of Divorce, and Acceptance of Divorce. The scores of these six subscales applicable to children of divorced families and scores of the 15 questions applicable to young adults from both married and divorced families (Common 15) were used. Examples of questions on the PFAD include, “My father is still in love with my mother,” and “My mother caused most of the trouble in my family.”

To measure feelings towards parental relationships, the Language Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth, 2001) was used. The LIWC is a computerized language analysis software that searches for, categorizes, and counts different types of words. The LIWC was used to find positive and negative affect words in participants’ answers when they were asked free-response questions regarding their parental relationships. The questions are as follows: “*Describe your relationship with your biological or adoptive father. Has your relationship with your father changed over time?*” and “*Describe your relationship with your biological or adoptive mother. Has your relationship with your mother changed over time?*” These two open-ended questions were combined for analysis purposes and were previously transcribed and processed using the Language Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC).

Data Analysis Plan

RQ1: Do Hispanic young adults from married and divorced families differ from non-Hispanic White young adults from married and divorced families on the number of positive and negative affect words used when describing their relationship with their parents?

Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults' answers to the free response questions were analyzed. The number of positive and negative words was combined, and factorial ANOVAs were conducted between Hispanic young adults from married and divorced families and non-Hispanic White young adults from married and divorced families on the number of positive and negative affect words used when describing the relationship with their mother or father, respectively.

RQ2: Do young adults from married and divorced families differ on the number of positive and negative affect words used when describing their parents based on their acculturation?

Multiple regressions were used to determine if parental marital status and participants' acculturation level predicted more positive/negative affect words.

RQ3: Are there differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults on reported levels of emotional distress related to a parental divorce?

Univariate ANOVAs were used to determine differences between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites on PFAD subscale scores from divorced families. Univariate ANOVAs were run on all PFAD subscales to determine if there were any significant differences. Univariate ANOVAs were also run with ethnicity and marital status as groups to compare the fifteen common items across married/divorced groups between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites.

RQ4: Do young adults' reported levels of emotional distress related to a parental divorce vary based on their levels of acculturation?

Linear regression was run to determine if acculturation levels predict total or subscale scores on the PFAD.

Results

RQ1: Do Hispanic young adults from married and divorced families differ from non-Hispanic White young adults from married and divorced families on the number of positive and negative affect words used when describing their relationship with their parents?

A factorial ANOVA was conducted using positive emotion words when discussing relationships with parents comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic White participants with both married and divorced parents. There was not a significant interaction between the ethnicity of the participant, the family marital status, and the positive emotion words used in their answers, $F(3, 282) = .013, p = .911$. Main effects tests yielded no significant results for ethnicity ($F(1, 284) = .129, p = .720$) and parental marital status ($F(1, 284) = .094, p = .759$).

A second factorial ANOVA was conducted using negative emotion words when discussing relationships with parents between Hispanics and non-Hispanic White participants with married and divorced parents. There was not a significant interaction between the ethnicity of the participants and the family marital status on the negative emotion words used in their answers $F(3, 282) = 1.260, p = .263$. There was not a significant main effect of ethnicity on negative emotion words, $F(1, 284) = .100, p = .752$. There was not a significant main effect of parental marital status on negative emotion words, $F(1, 284) = .892, p = .346$.

RQ2: Do young adults from married and divorced families differ on the number of positive and negative affect words used when describing their parents based on their acculturation?

The mean acculturation score was calculated ($M=158$) and then used to categorize participants. Participants with scores higher than 158 were categorized as highly acculturated and participants with scores lower than 158 were categorized as not highly acculturated. There was not a significant interaction between acculturation scores and marital status on positive affect words, $F(3, 155) = 1.718, p = .192$. There was a significant effect of acculturation levels on positive emotion words $F(1, 157) = 4.520, p = .035$. There was not a significant effect of marital status on positive emotion words $F(1, 157) = .042, p = .837$. There was not a significant interaction of acculturation scores and marital status on negative affect words $F(3, 155) = .576, p = .449$. There was not a significant effect of acculturation levels on negative affect words $F(1, 157) = .005, p = .943$. There was not a significant effect of marital status on negative affect words $F(1, 157) = .266, p = .607$.

RQ3: Are there differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults on reported levels of emotional distress related to a parental divorce?

There was no significant difference found comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults from divorced families on the Paternal Blame subscale of the PFAD, $F(1,158) = 2.377, p = .125$. There was no significant difference found comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults from divorced families on the Loss and Abandonment subscale of the PFAD ($F(1,156) = .079, p = .779$), the Filter of Divorce subscale ($F(1,156) = .643, p = .424$), the Maternal Blame subscale ($F(1,155) = .109, p = .741$), the Self-Blame subscale ($F(1,157) = 2.110, p = .148$), the Acceptance of Divorce subscale ($F(1,156) = 3.515, p = .063$), or scores on the PFAD Common 15 ($F(1,515) = .491, p = .484$). There was a significant effect of parental marital status on scores on the PFAD Common 15, $F(1,515) = 9.078, p = .003$. There was no

significant interaction found comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults and parental marital status on scores on the PFAD Common 15, $F(3, 513) = .029, p = .865$.

RQ4: Do young adults' reported levels of emotional distress related to a parental divorce vary based on their levels of acculturation?

Participant acculturation scores did not significantly predict painful feelings about paternal blame ($b = -.043, t_{(75)} = -.802, p = .425$), loss surrounding parental divorce ($b = -.040, t_{(75)} = -.901, p = .371$), seeing life through the filter of divorce ($b = -.029, t_{(75)} = -.618, p = .539$), maternal blame ($b = -.045, t_{(75)} = -.955, p = .343$), self-blame ($b = .003, t_{(75)} = .149, p = .882$), or acceptance of parental divorce ($b = .003, t_{(75)} = .121, p = .904$) in young adults from divorced families.

Discussion

This study investigated the subclinical levels of emotional distress related to a parental divorce in Hispanic and non-Hispanic White young adults of various levels of acculturation to American culture and their feelings about their relationships with their parents. Participants from married and divorced families completed surveys that included scales measuring acculturation and subclinical emotional distress after a parental divorce. Participants also responded to open-ended questions about the quality of their relationships with their mothers and fathers. Across all measures and research questions, only one significant effect was found—that of acculturation levels on the number of positive affect words used by a participant. The use of positive affect words was hypothesized to relate to more positive feelings about parental relationships.

Although research conducted regarding collectivist cultures would suggest that Hispanic young adults would be more affected by a parental divorce due to the expectation that everyone should/will fulfill their role in/obligation to the family collective (Triandis, 2018), this theory was not supported in this study. This lack of support could be potentially explained by a number

of factors. First, the same collectivist values that would suggest a heightened negative effect of a break in the familial structure may also suggest a stronger and closer extended family network that could provide support for children and young adults in the event of a parental divorce.

Hispanic young adults may, in general, have more extended family members living close to them and close to them emotionally to help with family duties, child care, and other forms of support. This closeness could offset the disruption and subsequent distress that often follows a parental divorce.

Another potential explanation has to do with socioeconomic status. The poverty rate for Hispanic children and adolescents is almost double that of non-Hispanic White children and adolescents (Macartney, 2013). Studies have shown that African-American children and young adults often experience less distress after a parental divorce because it may not be the only or primary stressful event in their lives (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Smith, 1997). This effect could also be present in Hispanic children and young adults. However, the fact that all participants in this study were university students could have leveled the playing field socioeconomically, making this phenomenon less likely to have had a significant effect on the results.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations in the current study. There were significantly fewer Hispanic participants than non-Hispanic White participants. This could have resulted in lower statistical power to find differences. Additionally, all participants were university students enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology class. As mentioned above, this could have limited the socioeconomic range and thus the representativeness of the sample and the external validity of the study. Concerning the research questions and results that have to do with acculturation, there

was relatively low variability in acculturation scores (i.e., most scores were in the higher range, meaning that most participants were highly acculturated). This could also be attributed to the fact that all participants were university students and most were of a similar age range. Lastly, because of the nature and age of the data, many distinct cultures were grouped together. These distinct cultures have widespread differences but were studied under the common label of “Hispanic.”

Future studies could address the same or similar questions using a broader age and socioeconomic range. They could also look deeper into the effect of acculturation levels of parents and young adults, as that was the only significant result found in the current study. Perhaps another study could look specifically at parental relationships with the parent with whom a child primarily lives with in comparison to the parent with whom the child does not live. It would also be interesting to look at young adults from other collectivist cultures and see if there are differences between cultures.

Summary

The only significant effect found was the effect of acculturation levels on the number of positive affect words used by a participant. This is a measure of positive feelings toward parental relationships. Although studies on collectivist cultures suggest a break in the familial structure would have more severe effects on children and young adults in those cultures, stronger extended family support networks and higher poverty rates may counterbalance those effects. These results could have been effected and skewed by several limitations, including a limited sample size and socioeconomic scope. This research could be built upon by exploring similar research questions applied to other cultures or looking at residential vs. non-residential parents.

Tables

Table 1

<i>Demographic Information</i>		
<u>Demographic</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	429	74.7%
Male	145	25.3%
<i>Age</i>		
18-22	555	96.7%
23-26	6	1.0%
27-31	8	1.4%
Over 36	5	.9%
<i>Income</i>		
Less than 15,000	36	6.3%
15-30,000	47	8.2%
30-45,000	74	12.9%
45-65,000	81	14.1%
65-100,000	142	24.7%
More than 100,000	183	31.9%
Self-supporting	3	.5%
<i>Parental Marital Status</i>		
Always Married	403	70.2%
Divorced	171	29.8%
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Hispanic	126	22.0%
White	404	70.4%
African American	9	1.6%
Asian	37	6.4%
Native American	4	.7%
Other	3	.5%

Note. Total of 574 participants.

Table 2

Breakdown of Hispanic Participants' Self-Identifications

<u>Identification</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Mexican-American	16	29.1%
Hispanic	52	94.5%
Central American	1	1.8%
Chilean	1	1.8%
Hispanic (non-Mexican)	2	3.6%
Hispanic American (non-Mexican)	7	12.7%
Mexican	8	14.5%
Panamanian	1	1.8%
South American	1	1.8%
Spanish American	1	1.8%
Spanish	5	9.1%
Total Number of non-White Hispanic Participants	55	

Note. Many participants selected more than one identification. Percentages given are of the total number of non-White Hispanic participants.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviation of Measures for Participants from Divorced Families

<u>Subscale</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Range</u>
<i>PFAD Paternal Blame</i>				
Hispanic	40	18.68	5.89	24
Non-Hispanic White	120	16.89	6.48	24
<i>PFAD Loss and Abandonment</i>				
Hispanic	40	18.20	5.29	22
Non-Hispanic White	118	18.47	6.12	22
<i>PFAD Filter of Divorce</i>				
Hispanic	39	20.41	5.58	21
Non-Hispanic White	119	19.62	5.24	23
<i>PFAD Maternal Blame</i>				
Hispanic	40	11.48	4.71	18
Non-Hispanic White	117	11.78	5.09	22
<i>PFAD Self-Blame</i>				
Hispanic	40	6.20	2.83	12
Non-Hispanic White	119	5.55	2.33	10
<i>PFAD Acceptance of Divorce</i>				
Hispanic	40	9.60	3.51	14
Non-Hispanic White	118	8.54	2.93	13

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