

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Acculturation Among Latinos in the U.S. Dominant Culture and the  
Relationship Between Stress and Alcohol Abuse

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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in collaboration with  
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May 2020

The graduate project of Angie Muñeton is approved:

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## Dedication

This graduate project is dedicated to my family: Any accomplishments of mine are due in no small part to their support. My sisters and best friends Maria Muñeton and Rosalia Muñeton - I could not have completed this program without your unconditional support. For the sacrifices you both made while I continued this educational journey. You have both always been my biggest supporters and motivators to do well. I will forever be indebted to you both. Our parents would be proud of all the adversities we have overcome. Know that my accomplishments are also your accomplishments. This also could not have been possible to my research partner Gloria Zavala, a woman who has taught me to fight for what I want in life. Most importantly I want to thank God for always shining his light and allowing my family and I through some very difficult times. Thank you to the faculty members of the California State University Northridge, every single one of you has provided more than you know.

## Table of Contents

Signature Page	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Literature Review	4
Discussion	11
Limitations	12
References	14
Appendix A: Addendum	19

## Abstract

### Acculturation Among Latinos in the U.S. Dominant Culture and the Relationship Between Stress and Alcohol Abuse

By

Angie Muñeton

Master of Social Work

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between stress and alcohol abuse among Latinos/Latinx while acculturating to the U.S. dominant culture.

**Discussion and Implications:** Literature findings have demonstrated a correlation between the acculturation process of Latinos to the United States and the relationship between stress and alcohol abuse. Mexican American immigrants are at greater risk of developing alcohol dependence due to stress, language barriers, legal status, and socio-economic disadvantage. Mexican born Latinos having a 91% chance of developing alcohol dependence (Caetano et al.2019). Acculturation to the U.S. culture varies by location of migration, age, gender, and the resources an individual has in their country of origin, can be a determining factor in their acculturation to the U.S. (Lee et al., 2013). Insufficiency of treatment for alcohol abuse within the Latino culture is partially due to gaps in communication, unfamiliarity resources, and of the helping systems of treatments in their community (Zemore et al., 2008).

**Keywords:** Latino, Acculturation, US Culture, Alcohol Abuse, Stress, Acculturative Stress

## **Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

Latinos are migrating to the United States at greater rates than ever before. What does that mean for the families that migrate to a new culture? They are faced with new challenges of acculturation. According to Bernal (2017), "Immigration typically involves acculturation, a complex process in which individuals integrate the cultural traditions and values of another society while altering many of the traditional customs from their country of origin (or their parents' country of origin) to accommodate" their new environment with a new culture in the U.S. (Bernal, 2017, p.21). The process of acculturation is stressful and brings about many issues. Latinos are likely to develop unhealthy coping strategies when dealing with the adversities leaving them to develop high levels of stress and cope by turning to drugs or alcohol. This study intends to determine how Acculturation to the U.S. Dominant Culture contributes to the relationship between stress and alcohol abuse among Latinos.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between stress and alcohol abuse among Latinos/Latinx. The study intends to show how acculturation adds high levels of stress among Latinos and how unhealthy coping skills are developed by seeking alcohol to cope with stress. The study will demonstrate how there is a strong relationship between acculturation, stress, and alcohol abuse among Latino males. The study will also provide knowledge for social service providers to develop policies that target specific cultural needs. The study aims to gather an understanding when working with Latino Families that present with acculturation issues. Most of the time people do not understand they are having issues with acculturation, as behaviors manifest through alcohol abuse, stress, and relationship issues (domestic violence). It is proven

that socioeconomic status, discriminatory experiences, immigration encounters, and acculturation are primary factors for high levels of stress among Latinos immigrating to the United States (Finch & Vega. 2003). All these factors bring about additional stressors that affect the adaptation and transition to a new life in a foreign country. Many people leave their country in search of economic growth, better opportunities, and higher living conditions; not knowing that it is difficult to adapt to a new environment with language barriers, new cultural influences, discrimination, and unjust prejudicial treatment.

### **Research Question**

This study aims to investigate and answer the following question: What is the relationship between stress and alcohol abuse for Latinos in the United States as they acculturate to the U.S. dominant culture?

### **Significance to Social Work**

The significance of this study to direct Social Work practice is prominent as acculturation contributes to stress and alcohol abuse, which can present as a social issue, affecting communities, individuals and family dynamics. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that Latinos make up 48% of the population in Los Angeles County which is a significant number (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Social Workers and agencies need to be mindful of developing policies that target the cultural needs of Latino Families. Agencies that work directly with families that face acculturation issues will benefit from the research and information obtained in this study to provide appropriate services for all Latino families. Latino families are affected by the high levels of stress and alcohol abuse Latino men experience. Leaving Latino families vulnerable to physiological, psychological and emotional distress. The youth who witness the harmful effects of acculturation in the United States will account for much of the nation's population. Lee et al.

(2013) discuss the increased risks of alcohol use among those who migrate to the U.S. in comparison to those who are the U.S. born, and how it presents itself as a cultural hardship for those within the Latino culture (Lee et al., 2013).

## **Literature Review**

To understand acculturation, scholars have yet to develop or adopt a consensus regarding the operational definition of acculturation, which is believed to contribute to the limited research conducted on acculturation (Valencia & Johnson, 2008). Valencia and Johnson (2008), identify 13 different known scales for measuring acculturation among Latinos, they also vary in content areas. This adds to their stance on why there is a complexity in defining acculturation and the development of the framework for this type of research. Acculturation is the process of adapting to the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a new culture (NIH.2019). An interesting finding with the multi-dimensional acculturation scales suggests that language and place of birth are strong predictors for substance abuse for Latinos (Valencia & Johnson, 2008). However, the literature suggests that treating acculturation as a uniform process across all groups regardless of race, culture, gender or social status needs to be modified to include methodologies that not solely rely on self-reported practices (Alvarez et al., 2017). It is highlighted that the majority of acculturation and alcohol studies among Latino/ Hispanics were conducted before the year 2000, as only 7 of the 32 studies were published (Casteneda et al., 2019). Ethnic Identity is used as an operationalized variable when measuring an individual's identity and is used to connect to mainstream culture (Maupome et al., 2015). The age which a foreign-born individual arrives to the U.S. is a predictor to acculturation, the younger an individual the easier is it to adapt to new environments, and the older an individual is the more challenging it is to adapt to the new cultural settings (Maupome et al., 2015).

## **Demographic Description:**

For this research, the term Latino refers to a person who identifies with having ancestral or having Descendants from Spanish speaking lineage. Latinos can be both US-born or be from Latin America (i.e. be considered *Latino Americanos*) (Cole.2020).

## **Acculturation Among Latinos**

Acculturation has a dualistic effect (Cabassa, 2003), it deals with maintaining two independent forms of one's identity. Individuals deal with their born into cultural expectations and those of the U.S. dominant culture. The success in network building and a new economic system affect the acculturation experience of migrant groups (Cabassa, 2003). Obtaining a more detailed understanding of how acculturation occurs, has much to do with the types of measurement scales used to interpret the different levels of acculturation (Maupomé et al., 2015). Maupomé et al, (2015) considers the Psychological dimension of acculturation and the surrounding social issues. The utilization of this scale provides a look into values, ethnic interaction, preferred use of language, cultural domain, and their identities.

Acculturation in the United States varies within Latin cultures in the United States. While many studies have focused on the years of residency in the United States, acculturation depends on the country of origin and the influence it has on immigrants extends to whether or not something is perceived as a social stressor, thus beginning the process of acculturation to the US dominant culture(Lee et al., 2013). It is also important to note that immigration-related challenges (separation from family, traditions, and language difficulties) legal status and the fear of deportation are added stressors that affect the person's psychological, physical and emotional wellbeing (Arbona et al., 2010).

With the added stress and discrimination, substance use is utilized as an avoidant coping strategy that initiates the unhealthy coping response to the stress of community resistance (Ornelas et al., 2009). Acculturation tends to become present when a disassociation with the former culture decreases (Valentin, 2001). Sacrificing their ethnic identity to increase social connectedness with American culture adds to greater levels of acculturation, and in trying to adapt to the new dominant culture a variety of social interactions alter their ability to cope with the culture shock (Valentin, 2001).

### **Acculturative Stress in the Latino Population**

According to The American Institute of Stress (2018), stress can be defined as, "physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension" and/or "a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual can mobilize" (The American Institute of Stress, 2018). When combined stress and acculturation According to Arbona, Olvera, and Rodriguez (2010), "Researchers have coined the term acculturative stress to refer to the level of psychosocial strain experienced by immigrants and their descendants in response to the immigration-related challenges (stressors) that they encounter as they adapt to life in a new country." Acculturation stress is based on the Lazarus Stress and Coping Model (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) it comes mostly from Latinos dealing with the discrimination surrounding their "otherness," the anti-immigration policies which can result in isolation and changes in cultural values. Due to the lack of cultural support, newly migrated Latinos attempt to connect with the dominant culture, yet face rejection, which leads to acculturative stress (Perez et al., 2013). "Acculturation Stress Affects individuals of all acculturation levels, and in different ways (Lee et al., 2013., p.3).

Income correlates with acculturative stress, the lower incomes are the more likely to only report alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism, furthermore, the greater the income the more likely an individual experiences stress and chooses to cope with drugs and alcohol (Lee et al., 2013). Acculturative stress is influenced by multiple factors, the degrees of acculturation to the dominant culture the preference for Spanish as one's language, the tightness of cohesive forces within family, and the short tenure in residency within the adopted country all contribute to acculturative stress, and deficits in coping resources appear to be the strongest predictor (Miranda & Matheny, 2000).

### **Alcohol use in the Latino Population**

Alcohol Abuse or Alcohol Disorder (AUD), is a chronic relapsing brain disease characterized by compulsive alcohol use, loss of control over alcohol intake, and a negative emotional state when not using (NIH, 2019). Hispanic Latinos consistently face a greater burden of alcohol abuse and substance abuse and dependence when compared to non-Latino whites (NLW) (Valdez et al., 2018). It is noted that the influence of acculturation to U.S. mainstream society influences the alcohol use patterns for Latinos (Castaneda et al., 2018).

With barriers posed, alcohol is used to relieve stress and alleviate the pressures related to the adjustment (acculturation), to the United States (Ornelas et al., 2009). Additionally, the use of alcohol creates greater unintentional injuries for Latinos, including alcohol poisoning, violence, risky sexual behavior, reproductive health issues, behavioral and social problems and liver disease (Castaneda et al., 2019). Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA, 2005) conducted a national survey and results indicated that Latinos reported lower levels of alcohol and marijuana use, while it also generated that Latinos born in the U.S. have higher use of recreational drugs (Valencia & Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, the

study found a positive correlation in the use of drugs with the years of residence in the U.S. among Latinos (Valencia & Johnson, 2008). Most of the research conducted on acculturation tends to be centered around those of Mexican descent (Caetano et al., 2009). Research indicates that previous exposure to alcohol can create greater dependence on alcohol once people are in the U.S. (Caetano et al., 2009). The U.S. born Hispanics compared to foreign-born reports a 16% of alcohol abuse and foreign-born 91% of dependence. The U.S. born are "5 times more likely to have a lifetime diagnosis of alcohol abuse," (Caetano et al., 2009., p.216), it is only when foreign-born individuals with more than 13 years living in the U.S., is when they are considered to develop alcohol dependence and alcohol abuse (Caetano et al., 2009). Increased alcohol use is common among foreign-born Latinos when they are expected to adopt the traditions of the dominant culture (Karriker-Jaffe & Zemore, 2009). Karriker-Jafee & Zemore (2009), discuss the link between socio-economic status and levels of higher drinking. In considering the country of origin, it is significant to consider the reasons for migrating to the United States. Caetano et al. (2009) describe the political (for Cubans) and economic (for Mexicans) reasons thus influence acculturation. Latino men have higher incidence rates of alcohol and substance abuse-related intimate partner violence, higher liver cirrhosis mortality rates, and face disproportionate alcohol and substance use related contact with the criminal justice system (Valdez et al., 2019).

### **Economic Disparities**

Acculturation varies by country of origin and individuals who migrate to the United States are placed into two categories: (1) Human Capital Immigrants and (2) Labor Immigrants (Lara et al., 2005). Depending on the resources an individual has in their country of origin can be a determining factor in their acculturation in the U.S. (Lee et al., 2013). Human capital consists of education, wealth, skills, ability to speak English, and the governmental policies toward

certain minority groups, as well as the resources for families in the community they, reside (Lara et al., 2005). Those with human capital are more than likely to have an easier transition to the U.S. dominant culture than Labor Immigrants who tend to be of Mexican and Central American descent (Lara et al., 2005). Resistance from U.S. born individuals to those who are non-U.S. born adds stress to foreign-born individuals.

The effects of a person vary significantly according to the age the person migrated to the United States (Maupome et al., 2015). Latino men residing in areas of little similarity to their own culture are at 0.343 probable chance for problem drinking as opposed to 0.172 probability if they lived in areas with more similarities to their cultural backgrounds (Stroope et al., 2014). Highly populated Mexican areas are at a lower socioeconomic disadvantage than no-Latinos. The educational level in these areas and the manual labor jobs often create disadvantages to health (Stroope et al., 2014). However, the Latino Paradox states that they are overall healthier than their non-Latino counterparts (Lara et al., 2005). Due to the disproportionate socioeconomic disadvantage, Mexican men in comparison to other Latin groups have a greater risk of drinking (Castaneda et al., 2019., p.2). For men, being employed full time and having a lower income predicts high alcohol use. The literature states that having a lower socioeconomic status puts Latino men at higher risk of alcohol abuse (Castaneda et al., 2019). Rising income (and socioeconomic status generally) seems to be a strong candidate for explaining the relationships between higher acculturations and higher odds of drinking (Castaneda et al., 2019). Seeking treatment for alcohol abuse within the Latino culture is possibly due to gaps in communication, and lack of unfamiliarity of treatment (Zemore et al., 2008., p.448). A noteworthy possibility is that individuals who are experiencing acculturation and turn to alcohol may have already been experiencing alcohol problems before moving to the United States (Zemore et al., 2008., p.451).

The change in environmental surroundings, social context and the shifts in anti-immigration policy changes in the past decades have contributed to acculturation and stress (Lee et al., 2013). Socio-Economic status, education level, and age are factors in the living conditions of individuals in the United States are components of the acculturation structure to the middle class of society (Lara et al., 2005). Latinos who claimed Mexico as a primary residence were more likely to report perceived racial discrimination (Ornelas et al., 2009). Language barriers presented themselves as a frequent stressor among Latino immigrants and showed that 35% of individuals surveyed that language was the source of discrimination and 22% felt that it was due to their immigration status (Ornelas et al., .2009).

## Discussion

The current study discussed that acculturation varies within Latin cultures in the U.S. Acculturation occurs when something is perceived as a social stressor and it demands an individual to seek more resources than what is available to them. Stress is then experienced physically, mentally, and emotionally and becomes a constant in their lives which leads to alcohol abuse as a form of coping with acculturation. The insufficiency in coping resources contributes to the degree of acculturation experienced by Latinos in the dominant culture (Miranda & Matheny 2000).

Findings have shown that markers of acculturation to the dominant Anglo culture (such as birthplace, duration of residence in the United States, and language) are associated with greater alcohol use among a variety of immigrant groups including Hispanic/Latinos (Zemore, 2007). Studies indicate that Latinos have a greater likelihood of developing acculturation due to lower socioeconomic disparities and it puts Latino men at higher risk of alcohol abuse (Castaneda et al., 2019). Additionally, the possibility surrounding acculturation is that previous exposure to alcohol may be why Latinos turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism (Zemore et al., 2008). Insufficiency of treatment for alcohol abuse within the Latino culture is partially due to gaps in communication, unfamiliarity resources, and of the helping systems of treatments in their community (Zemore et al., 2008). There was little to zero references on how social workers provide services to the growing population. Additionally, there is no mention of whether areas with high Latino populations have outreach services to help alleviate the effects of acculturation on mental health.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of this study are the time constraints researchers faced in trying to obtain their research. As a result, researchers had to conduct a systematic literature review and rely on limited research available on this vulnerable population. Limitations also included minimal public data available for use in conducting further research. Additionally, when focused on obtaining accurate representation for population, there was a discrepancy in the scales used to measure acculturation, and alcohol use causing researchers to question the validity as a tool of measurement for acculturation and alcohol abuse. Furthermore, understanding the racial and ethical disparities when addressing acculturation, as well as appropriate coping skills presented as a limitation for researchers to conduct accurate research.

Future treatment programs should consider the intersecting effects of cultural, contextual, and gender-based factors (Valdez et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that Latino men face disproportionate challenges when undergoing conventional substance abuse treatment programs (Valdez et al., 2018). Issues that may directly or indirectly affect successful alcohol treatment are, but not limited to: social acceptance, legal status, economic disadvantages, language discrimination, and acculturative stress acquired while adapting to the dominant culture.

In conclusion, future research should 1) consider ethnic group differences and subgroup diversity, and 2) effects of acculturation as it relates to alcohol-related outcomes such as attitudes, perception, alcohol problems and alcohol dependence (Alvarez et al., 2017).

Limitations to this type of study are in the subjective nature of the cultural adaptation intertwined with treatment methodologies (Valdez et al., 2018). Future research directions must be inclusive

of community-based perspectives that may help better assess substance abuse problems and better formulate programs to diminish disparities (Valdez et al., 2016., p.1609).

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## Appendix A

### ADDENDUM –Acculturation among Latinos in the U.S. Dominant Culture and the Relationship Between Stress and Alcohol Abuse

**Acculturation among Latinos in the U.S. Dominant Culture and the Relationship Between Stress and Alcohol Abuse** is a joint graduate project between **Gloria Zavala** and **Angie Muñeton**. This document will explain the division of responsibilities between the two parties. Any additional information can be included in a separate document attached to this Addendum page.

**Gloria Zavala #1** is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Abstract- Provides an overview of the systematic literature review.
- Purpose- Describes the purpose for the systematic Literature review and the regarding the research topic
- Brief Discussion & Implications- Synopsys of the Discussion and Implications within Systematic Literature Review findings
- Definitions of Terms- (a)Acculturation (b) Acculturation Stress (c)Stress (d)Alcohol Abuse- Provides detailed definitions for the frequently used term throughout the research as it is imperative for understanding the topic

**Angie Muneton #2** is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Demographic Description- Which allowed for an understanding of population of interest for this research
- Significance to Social Work- Described the relevance of this research to social work and the different ways in which research is expected to create competency
- Effects of Acculturation, substance abuse in the U.S. Culture- Subheadings (a)Acculturation- (b)Acculturative Stress and (c)Alcohol U.S. Dominant Culture- Obtaining a more detailed understanding of how acculturation occurs on the Latino population, Describes the different ways Acculturative Stress Affects individuals of all acculturation levels, Alcohol in the U.S. Culture- Discuss the barriers posed that lead to alcohol use to relieve stress and alleviate the pressures
- Economic Disparities- discuss the link between socio-economic status and levels of higher drinking.

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:

- Literature References - Each Student Acquired background information on the topic and contributed to the literature review section of the research
- Problem Statement - a concise description of the issues that need to be addressed by researchers
- Purpose of Study- identify and describe the concept for the research topic
- Research Question- Developed the research question for the topic
- Significance to Social Work-Described the relevance of this research to social work and the different ways in which research is expected to create competency
- Discussion- Analyzed the Literature review portion of the Paper and Discuss the practical meaning of the findings
- Implications- Discuss the implications that our research presents toward social work practice.
- Limitations - Discuss previous research, suggest different approaches to gathering of data which will provide further understanding of the topic.

