



The importance of addressing acculturative stress in marital therapy with Hispanic immigrant women

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ABSTRACT. In this study, we examined the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress among Hispanic immigrant women ($N = 95$) from the community and explored the role of other variables believed to be important to marital functioning generally, and among immigrants, specifically (e.g., acculturation, ethnic identity, social support, etc.). Consistent with transactional theory of stress, increases in acculturative stress were associated significantly with higher levels of marital distress. A stepwise regression analysis indicated that, among study variables, only acculturative stress and social support contributed significantly to the prediction of marital distress. A mediational analysis indicated that social support partially mediated the effects of acculturative stress on marital distress. Overall, results suggest that although social support seems to reduce both acculturative stress and marital distress, acculturative stress appears to be linked independently with marital distress. The importance of mental health professionals to address acculturative stress with Hispanic women or couples in marital therapy is discussed.

KEYWORDS. Acculturative stress. Marital therapy. Marital distress. Hispanic immigrants women. Survey descriptive study.

RESUMEN. Se estudia la relación entre el estrés acultural y el malestar con la pareja en una muestra comunitaria de mujeres inmigrantes hispanas ($N = 95$) y se explora el

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papel de otras variables importantes para el funcionamiento de la pareja, y específicamente entre los inmigrantes (aculturación, identidad étnica, apoyo social, etc.). En consonancia con la teoría transaccional del estrés, los aumentos en estrés acultural se asociarán significativamente con niveles altos de malestar con la pareja. Los resultados del análisis de regresión paso a paso señalan que, entre otras variables, únicamente el estrés acultural y el apoyo social contribuyen significativamente a la predicción del malestar de pareja. A través de análisis mediacional se observa que el apoyo social se comporta como mediador parcial de los efectos del estrés acultural sobre el grado de malestar de pareja. Los resultados sugieren que aunque el apoyo social parece reducir tanto el estrés acultural como el malestar de pareja, el estrés parece relacionarse de manera independiente con el malestar de pareja. Se discute la importancia de que los profesionales de la salud mental tengan en consideración el estrés acultural a la hora de trabajar con mujeres hispanas o con parejas en terapia de pareja.

PALABRAS CLAVE. Estrés acultural. Terapia de pareja. Malestar con la pareja. Mujeres inmigrantes hispanas. Estudio descriptivo con cuestionario.

For many Latinos or Hispanics—as with all ethnic groups—marriage is considered the foundation for establishing a family and for experiencing emotional intimacy and security (Falicov, 1982, 1992; Oropesa and Landale, 2004). Yet, the empirical literature indicates that marital relationships are a primary source of dissatisfaction for many people, including Hispanics, and that marital distress is one the most common reasons individuals seek therapy (Padilla and Borrero, 2006; Snyder, Castellani, and Whisman, 2006; Snyder, Heyman, and Haynes, 2005). Marital strife in conjugal relationships is implicated in domestic violence (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, and Tritt, 2004), child behavioral problems (Davies, Myers, and Cummings, 1996), and divorces (Gottman, 1994). Moreover, the quality of marital relationships has been linked to both positive and negative physical and mental health outcomes (Barnett, Steptoe, and Gareis, 2005). For example, depressive symptoms in one partner are associated with lower overall marital satisfaction in both partners (Gottlib and Whiffen, 1989), and conflict-laden relationships are associated with symptoms of depression and stress, and low levels of marital satisfaction (Acitelli and Badr, 2005; Dehle, Larson, and Landers, 2001).

Although men and women appear to pursue marriage with equal enthusiasm, marital relationships may be more distressful to women than men due to the multiple demands placed on them in the context of domestic responsibilities vis-à-vis their own financial and career aspirations and challenges (Prigerson, Maciejewski, and Rosenheck, 1999). The picture for Hispanic women may be even grimmer in light of possibly adhering to relatively more rigid gender-role expectatations (Falicov, 2005; Garcia-Preto, 1998; Vazquez, 2005) and experiencing additional distress related to conflicting pressures to acculturate. Specifically, some Hispanic women may feel pressure to adopt U.S. behaviors and norms in non-domestic contexts (e.g., at their place of employment), while simultaneously feeling pressure from family members or friends to maintain behaviors and values consistent with their own culture-of-origin norms. This latter form of acculturation—toward the maintenance of behaviors and values consistent with aspects of a Latino

or Hispanic culture— has been referred to as enculturation (Miville and Constantine, 2006) or as ethnic-society immersion (Stephenson, 2000). Pressures to enculturate toward the Hispanic culture has been found to predict stress among Hispanic college students (Castillo, Cano, Chen, Blucker, and Olds, 2008).

Pressures to acculturate likely are experienced differently across individuals and for some, may create an intra- and interpersonal stress syndrome referred to as acculturative stress (Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, and Garcia-Hernandez, 2002). Some researchers (Crockett *et al.*, 2007; Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, and Garcia-Hernandez, 2002) suggest that the acculturative challenges faced by immigrants likely influence subsequent generations who may struggle with the extent to which they maintain a bicultural life style and identity. Moreover, the degree and quality of acculturation may vary across contexts, as employers and coworkers, school personnel, family members and friends may have distinct role expectations. Shifts between role-expectations may create a disorganized sense of self, as one's self concept is continually being reorganized in accordance with contextual expectations. Further, acculturation may dominate cognitive processes and coping skills, leaving less emotional resources to deal with other life demands.

For Hispanic immigrants in the United States, acculturative stress may result from struggling to communicate with English-speakers, perceived cultural or value incompatibilities between mainstream United States culture and their culture of origin, and from having a heightened awareness or concern over their foreign status. Acculturative stress has been found to correlate with psychological symptoms and behavioral problems such as anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse, and eating disorders (*e.g.*, Gil, Wagner, and Vega, 2000; Hovey and Magana, 2002; Perez, Voelz, Pettit, and Joiner, 2002). Some research has found that Latinos who have achieved a bicultural orientation have lower rates of psychopathology (LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton, 1993; Padilla, 1995). Berry (2006) has speculated that possessing well-developed coping skills ought to help mitigate the negative effects of acculturative stress.

Based on empirical studies or theoretical considerations, several variables have been identified as contributing to acculturative stress. For example, higher levels of social support (Hovey and King, 1996), ethnic identity (Sanchez and Fernandez, 1993), self-esteem (Mena, Padilla, and Maldonado, 1987) and self-efficacy (Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey, 2004) have been found to be associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. By contrast, general life stressors (Dona and Berry, 1994), a perceived absence of choice to have immigrated (Hovey, 1999), and perceived discrimination based on minority or immigrant status (Gil and Vega, 1996) have been found to be associated with higher levels of acculturative stress.

Despite that a handful of studies have examined the relation between marital distress and acculturation (*e.g.*, Casas and Ortiz, 1985; Florez, Tschann, Van Oss-Marin, and Pantoja, 2004; Negy and Snyder, 1997; Vega, Kolody, and Valle, 1988), no published study has examined the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress. This study represents an effort to address this void in the literature. Stress stemming from perceived or real pressure to acculturate is an extensively studied and documented phenomenon among Hispanics living in the United States (Gil *et al.*, 2000; Negy, Schwartz, and Reig-Ferrer, 2009; Perez *et al.*, 2002; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2002). Moreover,

consistent with transactional stress theory (Pillow, Zautra, and Sandler, 1996), stressful life events—or even moderate-scale events that are prolonged and ongoing, such as acculturative stress—tend to exacerbate the stress experienced in other life domains (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). If acculturative stress is linked with marital distress among some Hispanics, acculturative stress should be addressed, and if necessary, treated, as part of relationship therapy with Hispanic clients. For this study, we hypothesized that increases in acculturative stress would be associated with higher levels of marital distress.

A confluence of variables likely contributes to marital distress. Although some of these variables influence the quality of relationships irrespective of ethnicity or immigration status (e.g., social support, family-of-origin, general life stressors), other variables (e.g., ethnic identity, level of acculturation) are unique to individuals who are immigrants or ethnic minorities. These sets of variables were included in this study in order to clarify their respective role in marital distress among Hispanic immigrants and to examine their possible mediational effects of acculturative stress on marital distress. Mediating variables often shed light on potential causal relations between variables (Baron and Kenny, 1986). From an applied perspective, mediating variables may serve as entry points for clinical interventions.

In this survey descriptive study (Montero and León, 2007; Ramos-Álvarez, Moreno-Fernández, Valdés-Conroy, and Catena, 2008), married Hispanic women living in the United States were the targeted immigrants for several reasons. Women, irrespective of ethnicity, generally seek therapy more frequently than men (Bankoff, 1994; Vessey and Howard, 1993). Women also are more likely to initiate therapy for relationship concerns than men (Doss, 2003; Guillebeaux, Storm, and Demaris, 1986; Wolcott, 1986). Further, Hispanic couples, particularly Hispanic women, represent an understudied population in the empirical literature on relationships (Bean and Crane, 1996; Bean, Perry, and Bedell, 2001). Despite some evidence that gender roles and occupational opportunities for Hispanic women—both within and external to the United States—are changing in the direction of egalitarianism (Falicov, 2005), some Hispanic women may, in various degrees, adhere to self-imposed expectations about their roles and responsibilities, particularly within the contexts of family and marriage (Garcia-Preto, 1990, 1998), thereby potentially generating additional conjugal conflicts.

Method

Participants

The sample was comprised of 95 Hispanic immigrant women living in the greater Central Florida region. To qualify for participation, the women had to self-identify as being of Latin American origin, be at least 18 years of age, born outside the United States, and be legally married. Thirty-seven of the women self-identified as Puerto Rican, 24 as South American (11 Colombians, 6 Venezuelans, 4 Brazilians, 3 Peruvians), 17 as Cuban American, 8 as Central American (8 Panamanians), 4 as Mexican American, and 5 as Other (3 Dominican Republican, and two did not specify their specific Hispanic subgroup membership). Puerto Ricans are not immigrants in the U.S. from a legal

standpoint (see Arbona and Virella, 2008). However, many Puerto Ricans' experiences in the United States are similar to those emigrating from other Latin American countries, thereby warranting their inclusion (*e.g.*, speaking Spanish, maintaining interdependent family relations, holding parents and elders in relatively high regard, etc.). The average number of years the participants had lived in the U.S. was 20.1 ($SD = 13.27$) and ranged from 1 year to 55 years. The average age of the participants was 40.4 years old ($SD = 9.88$) and ranged from 20 to 70 years of age (compared to a median age of 27.6 years for Hispanics in the nation). The majority of participants reported having attended several years of college (M number of years of education = 14.92), had an average of two children, and reported an average annual family income between \$40,000 to \$50,000 (compared to 61.7% of Hispanic women nationally who have 12 or more years of education and 13.1% having at least graduated from college; the average annual income of Hispanics nationally is approximately \$27,000). The mean number of years the women had been married was 14.34 ($SD = 8.34$). About twice as many participants elected to complete the questionnaires in English than in Spanish (63.5% vs. 35.4%, respectively). All considered, this sample of Hispanic women was older, but had household incomes that were comparable to that of the typical Hispanic household in the U.S. Their educational level appears to be fairly comparable to the educational achievement of the average Hispanic in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Measures

Consistent with the technique for translating questionnaires into a new language that originally was articulated by Brislin (1970), a team of two bilingual (English-Spanish), bicultural individuals initially translated all questionnaires into Spanish. An independent team of two bilingual, bicultural individuals subsequently translated the Spanish version of the questionnaires back into English. This second team of individuals had no prior experience with the instruments in English. Afterwards, all four individuals met to examine and compare the English-translated version with the original English version in order to address and resolve inconsistencies in translations. Both language versions of all of the instruments used in this study were found to have adequate reliability (reported below).

- Demographic Sheet. A demographic sheet asked participants to provide their age, gender, ethnicity, place of birth, number of years living in the United States, religious affiliation, marital status, educational level, annual income level, and occupation.
- Global Distress Scale (GDS). To measure marital distress, participants completed the GDS of the *Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised* (MSI-R; Snyder, 1997). The GDS assesses respondents' overall, subject appraisal of the quality of their marital relationship (higher scores reflect greater distress). Participants respond to statements using a True-False response format. Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the GDS was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .95 (English version), .90 (Spanish version), and .94 (combined).
- Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE). The SAFE (Mena *et al.*, 1987) is a 24-item self-report questionnaire designed to

assess an individual's level of acculturative stress. The SAFE yields a total score and individual scores on four subscales (*Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental*). For this study, the total SAFE score was used except where noted otherwise. Each SAFE item is a statement that participants respond to using a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from «*not stressful*» to «*extremely stressful*.» Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the SAFE was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .92 (English version), .86 (Spanish version), and .91 (combined).

- Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS). The SMAS (Stephenson, 2000) is a 32-item questionnaire designed to assess an individual's level of acculturation. Each SMAS item is a statement that participants respond to using a 4-point Likert scale; response options are *False, Partly False, Partly True, and True*. The SMAS yields a total acculturation score and scores on its two individual subscales (*Dominant-society Immersion* and *Ethnic-society Immersion*). The *Dominant-society Immersion* scale measures the degree to which respondents are acculturated toward the larger, dominant (U.S.) culture, and the *Ethnic-society Immersion* scale measures the degree to which respondents are enculturated toward their culture of origin. Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the *Dominant-society Immersion* subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .60 (English version), .77 (Spanish version), and .75 (combined). The *Ethnic-society Immersion* subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .81 (English version), .66 (Spanish version), and .79 (combined).
- The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). The MEIM (Phinney, 1992) is a 12-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess individuals' level of identification with their ethnic group. The MEIM yields an overall ethnic identity score and scores on two subscales (*Ethnic Identity Search, and Affirmation, Belonging, and Commitment*). For this study, the overall ethnic identity score was used. Each MEIM item is a statement that participants respond to using a 4-point Likert scale, with options ranging from «*strongly agree*» to «*strongly disagree*.» Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the MEIM was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .87 (English version), .86 (Spanish version), and .87 (combined).
- The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). Social support was assessed using the 12-item MSPSS (Dahlem, Zimet, and Walker, 1991) to determine participants' perceptions of social support from family members, friends, and significant others. Each item is responded to using a 7-point Likert scale, with options ranging from «*very strongly disagree*» to «*very strongly agree*.» Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the MSPSS was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .96 (English version), .97 (Spanish version), and .97 (combined).
- Family Environment Scale (FES). The FES (Moos, 1974; Moos and Moos, 1994) is a 90-item, true-false self-report measure intended to assess the actual, preferred, or expected social environment of families. A modified version of the FES was

used in this study whereby respondents were instructed to respond to items in reference to their childhood family of origin. Consistent with previous adaptations of this measure (Moos and Moos, 1994), items were rewritten in the past tense in order to accommodate respondents' retrospective assessment of their childhood family climate. The FES contains ten subscales assessing three sets of underlying domains or dimensions related to the respondent's family social climate. For the present study, two subscales, *Cohesion* and *Conflict*, from the Relationship dimensions were administered to the participants. These subscales assess the degree of commitment, help, and support family members provide to one another, and the degree of conflicts occurring within the family. Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the *Cohesion* subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .58 (English version), .72 (Spanish version), and .62 (combined). The *Conflict* subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .71 (English version), .64 (Spanish version), and .70 (combined).

- The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). The SRRS (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) consists of 43 life events that are often reported as stressful. Respondents endorse items they have experienced in the last 12 months. The events vary in their degree of severity and according to Holmes and Rahe, 17 events are considered positive (*e.g.*, vacation), 18 are considered undesirable (*e.g.*, death of a loved one), and eight are considered as neutral events (*e.g.*, change in working conditions). The way the SRRS was scored for this study was by summing the total number of negative stressful events respondents had checked. To achieve this summation, one negative stressful event (divorce) was excluded from the summation, given that including divorce in the summation would have inflated any observed correlation between stressful life events and marital distress, due to their conceptual similarity.

Procedures

Graduate students working in a cross-cultural psychology research laboratory assisted with locating potential participants from places within the general community, such as churches, school events, private gatherings, etc. Also, participants often provided referral information of other potential participants who were contacted by the researchers to inquire of their willingness to participate in the study. All student recruiters were directed to seek broad representation of Hispanics across diverse socioeconomic strata and were prohibited from recruiting members of their own immediate family, but were free to draw on their own personal and organizational contacts in the community. Research assistants provided participants the study rationale, obtained informed consent, and administered all the questionnaires to the participants in their homes. Participants were not provided any feedback regarding their responses to the questionnaires, but were encouraged to contact the supervising researcher if they had any questions or concerns. Upon completion of the questionnaires, all participants received a \$10 gift card from a local department store as compensation.

Results

Descriptive information

On average, the women reported having been married 14.34 years ($SD = 8.34$ yrs). As a group, they also reported a level of marital distress ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 3.87$) that falls within the normal range obtained by women who served in the national normative sample (Snyder, 1997). Their average responses to the acculturative stress items ($M = 1.71$, $SD = .60$) corresponded to the response option «somewhat stressed,» suggesting that, as a group, the women perceived themselves only to be mildly distressed over the pressures to acculturate. Regarding acculturation, the women's average score on the SMAS' dominant-society immersion scale was 3.36 ($SD = .30$), whereas their average score on the SMAS' ethnic-society immersion scale was 3.38 ($SD = .32$), suggesting that most women had a bicultural orientation, though possibly slightly more adept in the dominant culture. The average ethnic identity score on the MEIM was 3.18 ($SD = .51$), reflective of a high level of loyalty and interest in maintaining their ethnic identity. The average score on the social support scale (MSPSS) was 5.91 ($SD = .94$), suggesting that most women perceived there to be a fair amount of social support available to them from family, friends, or significant others. Based on retrospective recall, as a group, the women reported an average level of both cohesion and conflict in their childhood families ($M_s = 6.39$ and 2.69 [$SD_s = 1.61$ and 1.79], respectively) based on the national normative sample (Moos and Moos, 1994). Finally, the average number of negative stressful life events reported by the women was 2.14 ($SD = 2.09$); given 17 potential negative life stressors from which to choose, this mean score suggests that the women were experiencing a mild level of life stressors during the time frame when this study took place.

Hypothesis testing

Results of a zero-order correlation analysis supported the hypothesis that increases in acculturative stress would be associated with increases in marital distress ($r = .32$, $p < .01$). Observation of Table 1 shows that six additional study variables correlated significantly with marital distress. Those variables were age, length of marriage, social support, family-of-origin cohesion, family-of-origin conflict, and negative general stressors.

Therefore, those variables were selected for inclusion in a stepwise regression analysis to clarify their respective contribution, relative to acculturative stress, to the prediction of marital distress (see Table 2). At step 1, with acculturative stress entered into the equation, $R^2 = .10$, F change_(1, 88) = 10.11, $p < .01$. At step 2, with social support added to the prediction of marital distress by acculturative stress, $R^2 = .15$, F change_(1, 87) = 4.63, $p < .05$. Adding social support to the equation resulted in a significant increase in R^2 . After step two, adding the other variables did not result in a significant increase in R^2 .

TABLE 1. Intercorrelational matrix for study variables.

<i>Variables</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
(1) GDS	--													
(2) Age	.23*	--												
(3) YrsMarr	.19*	.62***	--											
(4) YrsU.S.	-.11	.21*	.06	--										
(5) Educ	.05	.17	.24*	-.04	--									
(6) Income	-.02	.04	.11	.19*	.40***	--								
(7) DSI	-.14	.05	.11	.40***	.07	.16	--							
(8) ESI	-.09	.26*	.15	-.14	-.03	.03	.16	--						
(9) MEIM	-.01	.16	.14	-.13	.16	.11	.04	.37***	--					
(10) MSPSS	-.28**	-.13	-.11	.06	.27**	.15	.13	.18*	.16	--				
(11) COH	-.18*	.09	.04	.07	.27**	.22*	.12	.16	.02	.50***	--			
(12) CON	.26**	-.06	-.09	-.02	-.13	-.12	.00	-.02	.09	-.24*	-.35***	--		
(13) SRRSn	.20*	-.15	-.10	-.11	.08	-.16	-.12	-.03	.04	-.25**	-.20*	.23*	--	
(14) SAFE	.32**	.11	.21*	-.32**	-.00	-.15	-.26**	.10	.20*	-.21*	-.31**	.19*	.37***	--

Notes. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$; (1) GDS = Marital distress as measured by the Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (MSI-R); (2) Age = Age of participant in years; (3) YrsMarr = Number of years married; (4) YrsU.S. = Number of years residing in the U.S.; (5) Educ = Educational status; (6) Income = Annual family income based on 1 = less than \$10,000; 2 = \$10,000 - \$20,000; 3 = \$20,000 - \$30,000; 4 = \$30,000 - \$40,000; 5 = \$40,000 - \$50,000; 6 = \$50,000 - \$60,000; 7 = \$60,000 - \$70,000; 8 = more than \$70,000; (7) DSI = Dominant Society Immersion as measured by the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS); (8) ESI = Ethnic Society Immersion as measured by the Ethnic subscale of the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS); (9) MEIM = Ethnic identity as measured by the Multidimensional Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM); (10) MSPSS = Social support as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS); (11) COH = Family-of-origin cohesion as measured by the Cohesion subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES); (12) CON = Family-of-origin conflict as measured by the Conflict subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES); (13) SRRSn = Negative general stressors as measured by the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS); (14) SAFE = Acculturative stress as measured by the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE).

TABLE 2. Stepwise regression of study variables on marital distress (GDS).

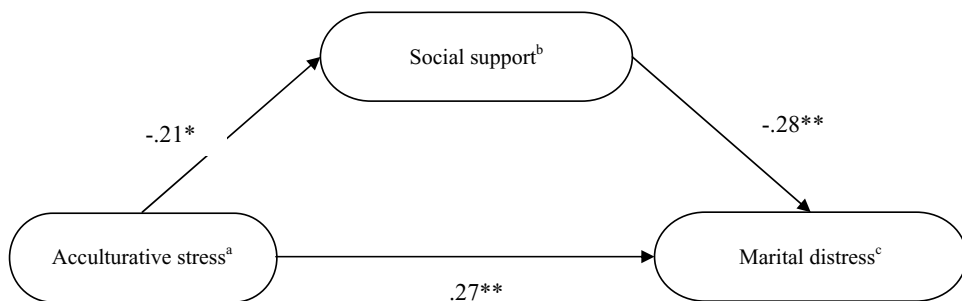
	<i>Variable entered</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>Significance of variable</i>	<i>R</i>	R^2	R^2 <i>Change</i>	<i>F</i> <i>Change</i>	<i>Significance of F change</i>
Step 1 ^a	SAFE ^c	2.05	.32	.002	.32	.10	.10	10.11	.002
Step 2 ^b	SAFE ^c	1.77	.27	.007	.39	.15	.05	4.64	.034
	MSPSS ^d	-.91	-.21	.034					

Notes. ^a Step 1's $F_{(1, 88)} = 10.10$, $p < .01$; ^b Step 2's $F_{(2, 87)} = 7.59$, $p < .01$; ^c SAFE = Acculturative Stress as measured by the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Scale; ^d MSPSS = Social Support as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support.

To further distill the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress, each SAFE subscale was correlated with marital distress. Three of the four SAFE subscales (Environment-which assesses stress related to difficulty in communicating with others in English; Social-which measures stress related to perceived or real racial discrimination; and Family-which measures stress related to family pressures to adhere to native or traditional cultural values) significantly correlated with marital distress ($r_s = .26$, $.34$, and $.32$ [$p_s < .05$, $.01$, and $.01$] respectively).

Finally, because social support was the only variable, apart from acculturative stress, to add to the prediction of marital distress in the regression analysis, we sought to determine if social support mediated, either partially or fully, the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress. Guided by the four steps for testing mediational effects articulated by Baron and Kenny (1986), we first regressed marital distress on acculturative stress to establish that the two primary variables of interest correlated with each other. Consistent with the previous zero-order correlation, results indicated that acculturative stress significantly contributed to the prediction of marital distress ($\beta = .32, p < .01$). Next, the hypothesized mediator variable, social support, was found to correlate significantly with both acculturative stress ($r = -.21, p < .05$) and marital distress ($r = -.28, p < .01$). Next, the hypothesized mediator variable (social support) was correlated with marital distress while controlling for the effect of acculturative stress ($r = -.23, p < .05$). Finally, to test social support as a mediating variable between acculturative stress and marital distress, marital distress was regressed on both acculturative stress and social support to determine if, with both predictor variables in the equation, social support would still correlate significantly with marital distress and if the correlation between acculturative stress and marital distress would either no longer exist or be reduced. Social support was predictive of marital distress ($\beta = -.22, p < .05$). Moreover, with social support in the equation, the effect of acculturative stress on marital distress was reduced ($\beta = .27, p < .01$), suggesting that social support partially mediated the effects of acculturative stress on marital distress (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Mediational model for perceived social support.
Standardized regression values appear along arrows.



Notes. $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$; ^aAcculturative Stress as measured by the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE); ^bSocial Support as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS); ^cMarital Distress as measured by the Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-R (MSI-R).

Discussion

It was hypothesized that increases in acculturative stress would be related to higher levels of marital distress among Hispanic immigrant women. The results supported the hypothesis. Stress stemming from perceived or real pressures to acculturate significantly correlated with distress women reported in their relationships. Other study variables (age, length of marriage, social support, family-of-origin cohesion, family-of-origin conflict, and negative general stressors) were found to correlate significantly with marital distress. When those variables were entered into a stepwise regression analysis to determine their respective predictive ability of marital distress, only acculturative stress and social support achieved significance. A follow-up analysis revealed that social support partially mediated the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress.

This correlation between acculturative stress and marital distress is noteworthy in light of the present women having resided in the United States, on average, for several decades and did not form part of a clinical sample. Yet, despite the modest levels of acculturative stress in absolute terms, acculturative stress was associated with marital distress. This finding is consistent with transactional theory of stress that suggests that stress from one source or context tends to influence and possibly increase stress felt in other contexts (*e.g.*, Pillow *et al.*, 1996; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Acculturative stress, as reported earlier, has been documented as a source of stress for many Hispanic immigrants living in the United States (Gil *et al.*, 2000; Hovey and Magana, 2002; Perez *et al.*, 2002). Our findings document the link between acculturative stress and marital distress.

Despite that other variables correlated with both acculturative stress and marital distress, the one variable found to partially mediate the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress was social support. Hispanic women who felt supported by family members and friends experienced less acculturative stress and marital distress. The availability of social support in one or more forms (*e.g.*, emotional, moral, economic) is widely known to aid individuals faced with myriad problems (Cutrona, 1996; Finch and Vega, 2003; Wilcox, 1981). In the present context, it appears that the availability of social support serves to buffer the effects of stress from external pressures to acculturate and, in turn, from distress experienced in marital relationships. We note that social support only partially accounted for the effects of acculturative stress on marital distress. Acculturative stress is an independent source of stress and appears to be associated with marital distress irrespective of the availability of support from one's social network.

For some Hispanic immigrants, the pressures to acculturate toward the larger United States culture may be at odds with pressures against acculturating (Castillo *et al.*, 2008). Apart from pressure to adopt mainstream behaviors and attitudes, some Hispanic women—particularly those who are married—may experience pressure from husbands, family members, or from others in their respective communities to retain customs and values corresponding with their native culture. Given some Hispanic women's presumed traditional role within the family (Falicov, 2005; Garcia-Preto, 1990), it is reasonable to expect that some women may literally be caught between two cultures, thereby requiring them to negotiate competing demands from distinct sources (Negy and Snyder, 1997). This notion is supported by the obtained correlation between the Family subscale of SAFE and marital distress among our sample of Hispanic women.

These results have implications in the context of therapy. In addition to addressing relationship concerns, mental health professionals who provide couples therapy to Hispanics or who treat individual Hispanic women who present with relationship concerns should assess, and treat as necessary, acculturative stress. This will require bringing the phenomena of acculturation and acculturative pressures to the forefront of the therapist-client dialogue, and will require clinicians to formally assess their clients' levels of acculturation and acculturative stress. There are many acculturation and acculturative stress instruments available in published form. Although a review of their strengths and limitations is beyond the scope of this paper, more information about them may be found elsewhere (*e.g.*, Sanchez-Johnsen and Cuellar, 2008; Zane and Mak, 2002).

With Hispanic clients who manifest acculturative stress, therapists should assist them in exploring the meaning of acculturation to them and ways to confront constructively the pressures to acculturate (Miranda, Estrada, and Firpo-Jimenez, 2000). For example, some Hispanic women (as well as men) may feel compelled to relinquish native customs and adopt behaviors consistent with the larger United States culture. Although change is inevitable and sometimes even adaptive, helping Hispanic women appreciate their freedom to select the changes they make has intrinsic therapeutic value (Garza and Gallegos, 1985). Such awareness of selective change would provide Hispanic women a sense of empowerment and control that might be foregone otherwise by adhering to the belief that acculturative changes occur irrespective of their own wishes and actions. If possible, clinicians should assess the acculturation level of Hispanic women's family members, such as husbands and children. Intrafamilial discrepancies in acculturation have been noted as sources of stress for some Hispanic families, particularly between parents and children (Gil and Vega, 1996; Szapocznik, Kurtines, and Santisteban, 1994).

Clinicians may consider providing psychoeducational information on stress, coping, and cognitions to Hispanic clients who are experiencing acculturative and marital stress. For example, Hispanics who maintain a bicultural orientation may have higher levels of psychological adjustment (LaFromboise *et al.*, 1993; Padilla, 1995). Clients can be informed about how behaviors may be more adaptive in some contexts than in others, and that flexible coping strategies have been linked to improved mental health (Berry, 2006; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Negy *et al.* (2009) recommend challenging Hispanic immigrants' unrealistic expectations about life in the United States. Expectations that exceed actual experiences violate individuals' assumptions, which in turn, may lead to psychological stress.

Because having access to social support likely mitigates the effects of stress from acculturative pressures and marital discord, the current findings highlight the importance of Hispanic married women identifying and utilizing individuals and even agencies, such as churches, community support groups, and so forth, during difficult times that may help them with advice, child support, or financial economic assistance. Bean *et al.* (2001) suggest that therapists act as advocates for Hispanic clients by helping to coordinate services and by helping them to identify resources in their social circle or community from whom to seek assistance.

Conclusion

This is the first published study that has examined and documented the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress among Hispanic immigrant women. We believe these findings are important because they highlight an overlooked and understudied aspect of marital distress among Hispanic women, and by extension, couples, which is the concomitant stress stemming from pressures to adapt to the larger United States culture. This study also underscores the important role social support plays in buffering the effects of acculturative stress on marital distress. From an applied perspective, our findings suggest that with appropriate guidance, Hispanic women may be in a better position to prioritize problems they wish to address in therapy in order to obtain symptomatic relief from the compounding effects of stress.

We focused on Hispanic women due to their presumed heightened levels of stress in their relationships relative to men. Future studies should include Hispanic men in order to gain additional insight into the complex relation between acculturative stress and marital distress (*e.g.*, husbands' own acculturative stress may contribute to their wives' marital distress and vice versa). Finally, there are other sources of stress in Hispanic immigrant women's lives besides the ones included in this study that may contribute to marital distress. We focused on acculturative stress because of its uniqueness to immigrants and because it has been neglected in the treatment of marital distress among Hispanic women in both research and therapy settings. Future research should expand this line of research by including other critical variables involved in both acculturative stress and marital distress.

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