

Acculturation, Parent-Adolescent Conflict, and Adolescent Adjustment in Mexican American Families

LAURI A. PASCH, PH.D.†
JULIANNA DEARDORFF, PH.D.‡
JEANNE M. TSCHANN, PH.D.§
ELENA FLORES, PH.D.#
CARLOS PENILLA, M.A.††
PHILIP PANTOJA, M.A.††

We tested an acculturation model in a community sample of Mexican American families (146 mothers, 137 fathers, and 146 adolescents) that proposed that differences between parents and adolescents in acculturation would be associated with parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent adjustment problems. Contrary to hypotheses, we found that families who exhibited an acculturation gap were not more likely to report parent-adolescent conflict or adolescent adjustment problems. In fact, familial conflict and adolescent sexual experience were associated with high levels of acculturation among adolescents and their parents. Pending replication, these findings suggest that both parent and children acculturation may independently predict familial processes and youth outcomes, irrespective of an acculturation gap. Future research should consider other factors aside from acculturation differences that might account for parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent adjustment in Mexican American families.

Keywords: Acculturation; Mexican-American Families; Adolescents; Parent-Adolescent Conflict

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†Assistant Professor, University of California, San Francisco.

‡Postdoctoral Fellow, University of California, San Francisco.

§Professor, University of California, San Francisco.

#Associate Professor, University of San Francisco.

††Research Associate, University of California, San Francisco.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lauri A. Pasch, 3333 California Street Suite 465, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA 94143-0848. Tel: 415-476-7760; Fax: 415-476-7744. E-mail: lauri.pasch@ucsfmedctr.org

This article examines the effect of generational differences in acculturation on the functioning of Mexican American families in the United States. Acculturation has generally been conceptualized on a continuum from full endorsement of the language, values, norms, interests, and behavioral patterns of the traditional culture to full adoption of the language, values, interests, and behavioral patterns of the mainstream American culture. One potentially important aspect of the acculturation process in families is that adolescents tend to acculturate more and faster than their parents do, thus creating a gap in the acculturation level of parents and adolescents (Szapocznik, Scopetta, Kurtines, & Aranalde, 1978). Young people more easily adopt the language, values, and behaviors of the more dominant culture that can clash with the traditional values and behaviors of the older generations (De la Rosa, Vega, & Radisch, 2000). It has been proposed that these acculturation gaps produce or exacerbate parent-child conflicts (e.g., Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002; Kurtines & Szapocznik, 1996; Vega, Gil, Warheit, Zimmerman, & Apospori, 1993).

ACCULTURATION GAP

Szapocznik and colleagues have proposed an acculturation model to explain how acculturation gaps affect family functioning and adolescent behavior in Cuban immigrant families (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). The model hypothesizes that more traditional parents become alienated from their highly Americanized children. The children, in turn, experience alienation from their less acculturated parents. In an effort to manage these differences, family conflicts erupt, with the parents attempting to restrict the process of acculturation in their children and instead succeeding in further alienating the children from the family and the values of Cuban culture. Szapocznik and colleagues proposed that parent-adolescent conflict then leads to adolescent behavior problems, including school problems, emotional problems, and alcohol and drug use. Szapocznik and colleagues also proposed that the effect of intergeneration differences in acculturation is most pronounced when families are making life transitions. Specifically, they proposed that cultural differences between parent and child add to the typical sources of stress resulting from the transition from childhood into adolescence. Although intuitively appealing, this acculturation model has received little attention in the empirical literature.

ACCULTURATION AND NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

Evidence supports that, in general, acculturation leads to poor outcomes among Latino youth (see Gonzales, Knight, Birman, & Siroli, 2004, for review). Vega and colleagues (1998) found that Mexican Americans who were born in the United States have significantly higher rates of psychiatric disorders than Mexican immigrants. Among Latino youth, acculturation has been linked to depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (see Gonzales et al., 2004), substance use (Brook, Whiteman, Balka, Win, & Gursen, 1998), and delinquent behavior (Fridrich & Flannery, 1995; Samaniego & Gonzales, 1999). Moreover, Samaniego and Gonzales found that family conflict and maternal parenting variables mediate the relation between acculturation status and delinquent activity, highlighting the importance of including family variables in studies of acculturation. Despite these links, the extent to which acculturation differences, or acculturation gaps, between family members play a role in these processes has received scant attention.

PARENT-ADOLESCENT CONFLICT AND NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

There also is ample evidence that parent-child conflict is associated with the development of a wide array of adolescent adjustment problems, including substance use, high-risk sexual behavior, and emotional, behavioral, and academic problems (Ary et al., 1999) across various ethnic groups (Bray, Adams, Getz, & Baer, 2001). However, the extent to which acculturation differences play a role in this process has been studied very little. Feliz-Ortiz, Fernandez, and Newcomb (1998) examined intergeneration discrepancy in cultural orientation indirectly by examining belief in egalitarianism in adolescent girls whose parents either spoke Spanish in the home or did not. They found partial support for Szapocznik's model; among adolescent girls whose parents spoke only Spanish in the home, those who believed in egalitarianism were more likely to use cigarettes and alcohol.

CURRENT STUDY

In order to address a critical gap in the literature to date, the current study investigated the combined effect of parent and adolescent acculturation level in relation to parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent adjustment in Mexican American families. This study was part of a larger study investigating adjustment in Mexican American adolescents. Level of acculturation was assessed for mothers, fathers, and their adolescent children. The frequency of parent-adolescent conflict was reported by both parents and adolescents. Three broad areas of adolescent adjustment were included: emotional distress (anxiety, anger, depressed mood), health risk behaviors (substance use, sexual experience), and school misconduct.

Based on the conceptual model put forth by Szapocznik and colleagues, we hypothesized that (a) conflict would be highest in families who exhibit an acculturation gap—that is, in those families in which adolescents are relatively high in acculturation and their parents are relatively low; (b) adolescent outcomes would be more negative in families who exhibit an acculturation gap, (c) high levels of parent-adolescent conflict would be associated with more negative adolescent outcomes, and (d) parent-adolescent conflict would mediate the relationship between parent-adolescent acculturation match and adolescent outcomes.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Adolescents and their parents were randomly selected from the membership list of a large health maintenance organization as part of a larger study of adolescent risk behaviors. Parents were sent introductory letters, screened for eligibility over the telephone, and subsequently invited to participate in the research. Families were eligible if the adolescent was between 12 and 15 years old, the parents were married or living together, both parents were of Mexican origin, all three family members agreed to participate, and the adolescent did not have a severe learning disability. Participants were interviewed individually at their doctor's office or in the research offices and then participated in follow-up telephone interviews 6 months later. Bilingual, bicultural interviewers conducted the interviews in the language preferred by participants. Seventy-three percent of eligible family members participated (153 fami-

lies). This report is based on information in the 6-month interview, at which point 146 mothers, 137 fathers, and 146 adolescents provided complete data.

Adolescents had a mean age of 14.0 years ($SD = 1.1$). Fifty-five percent were male. Mother's mean age was 39.8 years ($SD = 5.9$), and father's mean age was 42.7 years ($SD = 6.9$). Most parents were born in Mexico (84% of mothers, 89% of fathers) and had moved to the United States as young adults (M ages = 21–22 years). Most adolescents were born in the United States (78%). Parents had an average of 8 years of education (mother = 7.8 years, $SD = 4.6$; father = 7.9, $SD = 5.0$). Parents had an occupational status of about 3 (1 = lowest, 9 = highest; Hollingshead, 1975; M for mother = 3.3, $SD = 2.2$; M for fathers = 3.3, $SD = 1.8$).

MEASURES

Acculturation

Acculturation was assessed by using the six-item language subscale of the Marin Acculturation Scale (MAS; Marin, Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, & Perez-Stable, 1987). Items ask respondents to indicate the language in which they speak, read, think, and talk with friends. For each question, the response options ranged from 1 (*only Spanish*) to 5 (*only English*), with 3 representing equal use of Spanish and English. The Language subscale of the MAS has good reliability ($\alpha = .90$) and validity (r with generation = .69, r with length of residence in United States = .76).

Frequency of conflict

Adolescents were asked how often they have an unpleasant disagreement with each of their parents. Parents were asked how often they have an unpleasant disagreement with the study child. For each question, the response options ranged from 0 (*never*) to 9 (*several times a day*).

Adolescent Adjustment

Anxiety. We used the 20-item State Anxiety subscale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, Form Y (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970), which obtains reports of current anxiety (α s = .86–.94 for adolescents in previous studies; $\alpha = .87$ for this sample).

Anger. We used the 10-item State Anger subscale of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (Spielberger, 1988), which obtains reports of current anger as an emotional state (α s = .87–.90 for adolescents in previous studies; $\alpha = .92$ for our sample).

Depression. We used an 11-item brief version of the 21-item Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck & Steer, 1987) adapted for telephone use and asked the adolescent to report on his or her feelings during the past week. Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .81$).

School misconduct. Adolescents responded to six items adapted from other scales concerning inappropriate behavior at school, including copying from other students' work, cheating, tardiness, cutting class, being sent to the principal, and having had someone call their home regarding inappropriate behavior (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). Response options ranged from

1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*) and were averaged for a scale score. Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .76$).

Substance use. Adolescents reported on whether they had ever used alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and a list of 17 other drugs (e.g., amphetamines, cocaine). Half of the sample (54%) reported having ever used alcohol, 43% reported having ever used tobacco, 27% reported having ever used marijuana, and 16% reported having ever used at least one other drug. We assigned 1 point for each substance, resulting in an index from 0 (*no substance use ever*) to 4 (*having ever used alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and at least one other drug*).

Sexual experience. Adolescents reported whether they had engaged in a series of sexual behaviors, ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse. From these items, we created a degree of sexual experience scale. Scores on this scale represented the highest degree of sexual behavior in which adolescents had engaged (*no sexual experience* = 0; *kissing on the lips* = 1; *kissing with mouth open* = 2; *breast touching* = 3; *genital touching* = 4; *oral sex* = 5; *vaginal or anal intercourse* = 6).

RESULTS

Mothers had a mean of 1.83 ($SD = 1.01$, range = 1–5) on acculturation. Fathers had a mean of 2.00 ($SD = 1.01$, range = 1–5) on acculturation. Adolescents had a mean of 2.92 ($SD = .93$, range = 1–5) on acculturation. Both mothers and fathers scored significantly lower than adolescents, for mothers compared with adolescents, $t(147) = 20.07$, $p < .000$, and for fathers compared with adolescents, $t(146) = 19.28$, $p < .000$.

Using a midpoint split for mother and adolescent acculturation levels, four groups were created consisting of mother high/adolescent high ($n = 19$), mother low/adolescent high ($n = 81$), mother high/adolescent low ($n = 2$), and mother low/adolescent low ($n = 44$). The same procedure for father and adolescent resulted in father high/adolescent high ($n = 23$), father low/adolescent high ($n = 71$), father high/adolescent low ($n = 1$), and father low/adolescent low ($n = 42$). Because there were so few dyads in the parent high/adolescent low categories, these dyads were not included in analyses.

Regarding adolescent age, older adolescents reported more sexual experience ($r = .45$, $p < .000$), substance use ($r = .31$, $p < .000$), and school misconduct ($r = .24$, $p < .004$). Regarding gender, girls reported more conflict with their mothers ($r = .21$, $p < .05$) and fathers ($r = .20$, $p < .05$) and more anxiety ($r = .31$, $p < .000$), anger ($r = .28$, $p < .001$), and depression ($r = .27$, $p < .001$) than boys. Therefore, adolescent age and gender were included as covariates in all analyses.

Acculturation Group and Parent-Adolescent Conflict

To test the hypothesis that conflict would be highest in families who exhibit an acculturation gap, a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) was conducted with acculturation group (parent high/adolescent high, parent low/adolescent high, parent low/adolescent low) as the independent variable, and frequency of parent-adolescent conflict (as reported by the three raters) as dependent variables. Tukey post hoc tests were used when one-way ANOVAs were significant.

TABLE 1
Means (Standard Deviations) for Frequency of Conflict by Acculturation Group

Parent-adolescent conflict	Acculturation Group			F ratio
	Parent high/adolescent high	Parent low/adolescent high	Parent low/adolescent low	
<i>Father Report</i>	(n = 23)	(n = 71)	(n = 42)	
Father-adolescent conflict	3.87 (.44) _a	2.70 (.25) _{ab}	2.27 (.33) _b	4.28*
<i>Mother Report</i>	(n = 19)	(n = 81)	(n = 44)	
Mother-adolescent conflict	4.51 (.58)	3.50 (.27)	4.17 (.37)	1.86
<i>Adolescent Report</i>				
Father-adolescent conflict	3.79 (.44)	3.41 (.24)	3.80 (.32)	.58
Mother-adolescent conflict	4.32 (.48)	3.77 (.23)	3.37 (.31)	1.47

Note. Analyses controlling for adolescent age and gender.

* $p < .05$.

Using fathers' reports of conflict, there was a significant effect of acculturation group, such that when the father and adolescent were both high in acculturation, fathers reported more conflict with their adolescent than fathers in the other two acculturation groups (see Table 1). Using mothers' and adolescents' reports, there was no significant effect of acculturation group.

Acculturation Group and Adolescent Adjustment

To test the hypothesis that adolescent adjustment would be more negative in families who exhibit an acculturation gap, a series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted with acculturation group (parent high/adolescent high, parent low/adolescent high, parent low/adolescent low) as the independent variable, and adolescent outcomes as dependent variables, followed by Tukey post hoc tests.

As shown in Table 2, there was one significant effect for mother-adolescent acculturation group. When mother and adolescent were both high in acculturation, adolescents reported higher degrees of sexual experience than when the mother was low and adolescent high in acculturation. The mother low/adolescent high acculturation group did not differ significantly from the other two groups.

There were no significant effects of father-adolescent acculturation group on adolescent outcomes (not shown).

Parent-Adolescent Conflict and Adolescent Adjustment

A series of partial correlations was conducted to examine whether parent-adolescent conflict was related to adolescent adjustment (Table 3). Fathers who perceived more conflict with their adolescent had adolescents who reported more anxiety, anger, and depression. Mothers who perceived more conflict with their adolescents had adolescents who reported more anxiety and school misconduct. Adolescents who perceived more conflict with fathers reported more anxiety, anger, school misconduct, and substance use. Adolescents who perceived more conflict with their mothers reported more anxiety, anger, depression, school misconduct, and substance use.

TABLE 2
Means (Standard Deviations) for Adolescent Adjustment by Mother-Adolescent Acculturation Group

Adolescent adjustment	Acculturation Group			F ratio
	Mother high/adolescent high	Mother low/adolescent high	Mother low/adolescent low	
Anxiety	49.81 (2.83)	44.28 (1.33)	47.32 (1.81)	1.99
Anger	24.63 (2.05)	21.00 (.97)	23.61 (1.32)	2.03
Depression	19.74 (1.25)	19.86 (.59)	19.36 (.80)	.13
School misconduct	1.74 (.12)	1.68 (.06)	1.82 (.08)	1.09
Substance use	2.01 (.31)	1.32 (.15)	1.37 (.20)	2.02
Sexual experience	3.56 (.42) _a	2.24 (.20) _b	2.59 (.27) _{ab}	4.05*

Note. Analyses controlling for adolescent age and gender.
 * $p < .05$.

Parent-Adolescent Conflict as a Mediator of the Relationship Between Acculturation Group and Adolescent Adjustment

Mother-adolescent acculturation group was significantly associated with degree of sexual experience. However, because mother-adolescent acculturation group was not associated with mother-adolescent conflict, mother-adolescent conflict could not be considered a mediator.

DISCUSSION

We tested an acculturation model in a community sample of Mexican American families that proposed that differences between parents and adolescents in acculturation would produce or exacerbate parent-adolescent conflicts, leading to adolescent

TABLE 3
Partial Correlations Between Parent-Adolescent Conflict and Adolescent Adjustment, Controlling for Adolescent Age and Gender

Parent-Adolescent Conflict	Adolescent Adjustment					
	Anxiety	Anger	Depression	School misconduct	Substance use	Sexual experience
<i>Father Report</i>						
Father-adolescent conflict	.36**	.28**	.29**	.14	.11	.16
<i>Mother Report</i>						
Mother-adolescent conflict	.19*	.15	.01	.19*	.13	.15
<i>Adolescent Report</i>						
Father-adolescent conflict	.26**	.32**	.10	.33**	.34**	.15
Mother-adolescent conflict	.18*	.21*	.17*	.24*	.23**	.14

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

adjustment problems (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). As expected, on average, adolescents were more acculturated than their parents. The majority of adolescent-parent pairs consisted of an adolescent who indicated a preference for reading, thinking, and talking in English and a parent who indicated a preference for reading, thinking, and talking in Spanish. Contrary to hypotheses, we found that families who exhibited an acculturation gap (parent low in acculturation/adolescent high in acculturation) were not more likely to report parent-adolescent conflict. Also contrary to hypotheses, adolescent outcomes were not more negative in families who exhibited the acculturation gap. The only part of the model that was supported was that greater parent-adolescent conflict was associated with more negative adolescent outcomes, including anxiety, anger, depression, school misconduct, and substance use, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Bray et al., 2001).

Interestingly, the few significant effects of acculturation were found among families in which parents and adolescents both exhibited high levels of acculturation. Fathers in the father high/adolescent high group reported greater levels of conflict than fathers in the father low/adolescent high or father low/adolescent low groups. Perhaps when both father and child are acculturated, it is more acceptable to express family conflict. In fact, recent research suggests that less acculturated family members appear more invested in preserving smooth and respectful relationships with one another and are less accepting of open expressions of conflict, whereas more acculturated individuals value direct communication, which may result in conflict being expressed (Flores, Tschann, VanOss Marin, & Pantoja, 2004). Therefore, acculturated parents and youths may express conflict more openly, thus explaining differences in family conflict.

Alternatively, the stress associated with acculturation may be amplified when both father and adolescent are more acculturated, thereby leading to higher levels of conflict in father-adolescent dyads. Drawing on the general stress literature, cumulative risk is associated with adolescent maladjustment (Gerard & Buehler, 2004). However, a dearth of research has examined acculturative stress among Mexican Americans, much less the additive effects of acculturative stress among family members. Future work in this area is needed to further explore this possibility.

In addition, adolescent sexual experience was greater in families in which both the mother and adolescent were high in acculturation, as compared with families in which the mother was low and the adolescent was high. These findings suggest that mothers' levels of acculturation may represent a component in independently determining adolescent adjustment. Recent research has shown that maternal acculturation levels impact family processes regardless of mother-child acculturation discrepancies (Dumka, Roosa, & Jackson, 1997; Gonzales, Deardorff, Barr, Formosa, & Barrera, 2005). These findings may lend support to the idea that higher levels of acculturation among parents and their children may independently predict familial processes and adolescent outcomes irrespective of an acculturation gap.

There are several potentially important differences between Szapocznik's theory and our research design that may in part account for the lack of significant findings. First, Szapocznik developed the model based on his work with Cuban immigrant families, whereas we studied Mexican American families, some of whom were recent immigrants and some of whom were not. As a result, on average, our families may exhibit lower levels of acculturative differences (i.e., narrower intergenerational

gaps), which may have attenuated the findings. Rather than being considered a limitation, however, these differences in findings should underscore the importance of studying Latino groups as different entities and highlight the importance of considering nationality, migration history, and within-group cultural variability when studying acculturative effects.

Second, Szapocznik considered a variety of aspects of acculturation in considering parent-adolescent differences. However, in this research, we studied only language differences, in part as a proxy for the broader concept of acculturation that also includes values, norms, interests, and behavioral patterns. Despite the unidimensional nature of our measure, however, we have found high correlations between this measure and other relevant indicators (i.e., length of time in the United States). In addition, language differences have been considered to be important in their own right by some investigators, who hypothesize that the weakening of proficiency and comfort with which the native language is spoken and understood creates social distance between the generations (Silverstein & Chen, 1999). Nevertheless, the limited measurement of acculturation is a shortcoming of our research.

Third, whereas the Szapocznik model refers to a broader conceptualization of family conflict, our measurement was limited to the frequency of expressed conflict. Other unexplored dimensions of parent-child conflict, such as intensity or subject matter of conflict, may be important. Fourth, Szapocznik and colleagues developed their hypotheses through work with clinical populations of families at risk, whereas we studied a community sample. It is possible that the model is most applicable to distressed families.

This study is significant in that it tested a widely accepted model of acculturation, which to date has received minimal empirical attention, and subsequently yielded unexpected findings. These results underscore the need for future research to better understand the acculturative process among families. In particular, it appears important to examine the possibility that specific conditions may exist under which acculturation gaps lead to negative outcomes, whereas under other conditions, this may not prove to be the case. Examination of potential moderators of interest marks the next step in this research.

Future Research Directions

Further investigation of the relationship between parent-child acculturation differences and family functioning could build on the current study by studying other Latino groups, community and clinic samples, and recent immigrants and by assessing multiple dimensions of acculturation. If the findings of the current study are replicated, this would suggest that future research should consider other influences, aside from acculturation differences, that might account for or moderate the relation between parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent adjustment in Latino families. For instance, the hypothesized effects may operate to a greater or lesser degree depending on the gender distribution of child-parent dyads (e.g., mothers-sons, fathers-daughters), but limitations in sample size prohibited complete examination of this possibility in the current study. Other potential moderators or mediators of interest include nationality, migration history, and acculturative and discrimination stress. Moreover, our findings underscore the importance of studying Latino groups as separate entities to advance acculturation research.

Acculturation is a dynamic and complex process. This study represents an attempt to test one aspect of a complex model of acculturation, one in which family conflict mediates the relation between parent-child acculturation differences and youth outcomes. To further the field, future studies need to address more dynamic aspects of the acculturative process. For instance, it is likely that the process of enculturation (level of involvement in indigenous culture) and acculturation (level of involvement in mainstream culture) is important to consider when examining the influence of culture on family processes and child outcomes. Many researchers (e.g., Bernal, 1996; Gonzales et al., 2004) contend that these two processes are equally important and operate together to predict adolescent adjustment.

In addition, Gonzales and colleagues (2004) have encouraged us to think about two other important aspects of Latino culture that potentially relate to positive mental health: familism (identification with and loyalty to nuclear and extended family) and biculturalism (participation in host culture while retaining traditional cultural values and behaviors). Both appear to serve as buffers from negative outcomes and to enhance adolescent well-being. Thus, from a strengths-based perspective, future research efforts should strive to include these and related factors that could better explain the effects of acculturation on families.

Finally, our research suggests that mother's acculturation level may be associated with higher degrees of sexual experience in their adolescents. Perhaps mothers represent "key figures" in nurturing traditional cultural values concerning initiation of sexual behavior (e.g., Vega et al., 1993). High levels of maternal acculturation may be indicative of a value shift within the family and thereby predict detrimental consequences for youth in some areas. Replication of the current work and further study of the underlying mechanisms that lead to deleterious outcomes for youth are necessary to test this possibility. In general, future research that focuses on the complex nature of the acculturative process and its effects on individual family members and familial relationships is warranted to inform clinical intervention.

Clinical Implications

Results from the current study highlight important issues for clinical intervention with Mexican American youth and their families. Based on our findings, clinicians should exert caution when viewing acculturative differences among family members as the primary source of maladjustment for youth. A focus on the intrapersonal aspects of acculturation appears critical. As such, individual therapy to help parents and children navigate their own acculturative experiences, in combination with family therapy, may be the best approach to help ameliorate the negative effects of acculturation on families and youth. In addition, it will be important for clinicians to focus on the dual processes of acculturation and enculturation among Mexican American families. By helping family members retain traditional values that may be protective for family functioning, such as familismo and respeto, we may better prevent poor outcomes among Mexican American youth. Finally, results from our study indicate that family conflict is particularly deleterious for youth, regardless of acculturation level. Thus, clinical intervention efforts geared toward preventing and reducing conflictual relations among family members appears key to promoting adolescents' well-being.

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