

Acculturative Stress and Gang Involvement Among Latinos: U.S.-Born Versus Immigrant Youth

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Abstract

Gang involvement is an increasing issue among Latino youth, yet nuanced research on its potential causes is scarce. Quantitative and qualitative data were used to explore links between acculturative stress and gang involvement among immigrant and U.S.-born Latino middle school students ($N = 199$). Regression analyses showed that U.S.-born youths were more likely to be gang-involved if they experienced discrimination stress, but less likely to be gang-involved if experiencing adaptation stress. Neither form of stress predicted gang involvement among immigrant youth; however, several reported economic inequality as a difference between themselves and Americans. Those reporting inequality were more likely to be gang-involved than those who did not. These findings suggest gang involvement may work differently for U.S.-born and immigrant Latinos.

Keywords

Latinos, immigration issues, delinquency/crime, ethnic issues, community/neighborhood issues

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Over the past 8 years, the number of youth gangs in the United States has increased by 28%. Of 774,000 gang members in the United States, approximately 36% are below the age of 18, and approximately 50% are Latino (Howell & Egely, 2005). With such a disproportionately large representation, Latinos at risk for gang involvement merit research attention. While Latino gang activity is highest in Southern California, Texas, and metropolitan Washington D C, it is spreading in growing urban settings such as Atlanta. The Central American gang, MS-13, for example, is one of the most rapidly growing street gangs in the United States (Torpy & Rankin, 2010). Among the many factors predicting gang involvement, research suggests that acculturative stress and the acculturation experience more broadly play a determining role in the social development of Latino youth. Moreover, the associations between these factors appear to differ for foreign-born and U.S.-born Latinos. The present study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a deeper understanding of the connections between acculturative stress and gang involvement. Moderated regression models are used to examine how acculturation stress due to discrimination and cultural adaptation relate to gang involvement for U.S.-born and immigrant youth. Qualitative analyses explore underlying acculturation stressors within a segmented assimilation framework.

Understanding Gang Involvement: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches

Psychological studies on gang involvement employ a diverse array of methodological approaches and reveal that youth are influenced by systemic as well as individual factors. In a review of longitudinal quantitative studies, Howell and Egely (2005) found that low levels of community social capital and family problems in early childhood predicted later problem behavior and involvement with delinquent peers, while also mediating the association of these variables with gang involvement. Risk factors for becoming involved in youth gangs include the presence of drug traffic and low perceived security in one's community, individual life stressors, friends and family who are gang members, delinquent/violent behavior, and high interaction with or commitment to delinquent peers, low parental attachment and monitoring, and poor academic performance (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Curry & Spengel, 1992).

While such quantitative findings have been indispensable to youth gang interventions, qualitative studies can allow for a deeper understanding of how gang members view themselves and their self-explained motivations to join a gang. In a study of families of convicted Mexican and U.S.-born Mexican

gang members in Phoenix, Arizona, criminologists Zatz and Portillos (2000) found that gang members, paradoxically, viewed themselves as protectors of their communities even though they were often harming people in these neighborhoods. Some of them had parents who were also gang members, who, in spite of being rather lenient toward their children's gang membership, expressed concern about the increased violence that gangs are now engaged in (Zatz & Portillos, 2000). Despite these concerns, it seems that gang-involved family members' impact as role models along with few community resources leads Latino youth to create their own form of group solidarity that remains in strong opposition to mainstream forms of success. In an ethnographic study of the patterns of foreign- and U.S.-born Mexican students' academic achievement at a high school in California, Matute-Bianchi (2008) interviewed teachers and students. She found that immigrants tended to work hard to achieve academically, having a marked awareness of their opportunities in the United States that they did not have back home. Nonimmigrants identifying primarily as a U.S.-minority had less positive outcomes. They tended to develop their own counterculture, seeing their success as limited by structural barriers in society and often looking up to gangs more so than academic achievement. Most of these U.S.-born students had parents working low-wage jobs and lacking networks that could transmit their children an understanding of how to attain high-skilled work (Matute-Bianchi, 2008).

Both the relevant qualitative and quantitative research makes clear the importance of societal risk factors for a thorough understanding of gang involvement. Latino youth, in addition to their disproportionately high exposure to communities laden with poverty, also tend to be in some stage of an ongoing acculturation experience. Language barriers, discrimination, and adaptation to a culture different from that of one's family or homeland are some of the challenges of acculturation that permeate many Latino's lives and often cause stress (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). For a clearer picture of their involvement in gangs, then, it is important to understand how socioeconomic risk factors may function together with or even as part of acculturative stress.

The Role of Acculturative Stress

Acculturative stress is a risk factor that may negatively influence emotional development, lower self-esteem and academic performance, and predict problem behavior among Latino youth (Gil, Vega, & Dimas, 1994; Kuperminc, Wilkins, Roche, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2009; Vega, Zimmerman, Khoury, Gil, & Warheit, 1995). Since several of these outcomes are closely

related to gang involvement, it is important to explore the construct of acculturative stress, including different types of stress as well as underlying stressors as they are qualitatively defined by Latinos and how these relate to gang involvement.

Out of the many definitions of acculturative stress that can be found in the literature, Arbona and colleagues (2010, p. 364) comprehensively summarize it as "the level of psychological 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." Several measures exist to quantify acculturative stress, among them the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental (SAFE) Scale by Mena, Padilla, and Maldonado (1987) employed in the present study. Although this scale has been adopted for use among various immigrant groups, researchers have noted a few key characteristics of Latino acculturative stress in connection with their unique immigration experience.

Smart and Smart (1995) identified six stressors of particular importance to Latinos: racial discrimination, the importance of friendships and family in Latino culture, undocumented status, the physical proximity of their homelands (allowing one to remain between two worlds), the traumatizing history of civil war, and reliance on manual labor, which is becoming increasingly scarce. Saldaña (1995) found in a study comparing Whites and Latinos that stress due to ethnic minority status affected Latino college students significantly, constituting 8.25% of their physical and psychological distress symptoms. Latinos of low socioeconomic status experienced higher levels of distress. These findings indicate that race and poverty play a role in acculturative stress among Latinos. In line with this indication, several researchers studying Latinos have examined discrimination as a factor within their acculturative stress scale (Gil, Vega, & Dimas, 1994; Mena et al., 1987), and some have even incorporated poverty-related stressors (Vega et al., 1995).

Gil and colleagues (1994), for example, examine several aspects of acculturative stress, including language issues, discrimination, tension due to mismatching cultural values, and acculturative dissonance. In a sample of middle school Latino boys (in the sixth and seventh grade) in metropolitan Miami they found that, although foreign-born immigrants experienced more overall acculturative stress, this stress had a greater negative impact on self-esteem for U.S.-born youth. U.S.-born boys reported more discrimination, while language conflict was more prominent among first-generation youth. The detrimental effects of acculturative stress were strongest for U.S.-born youth who were not highly acculturated to U.S. society.

Using this same sample, Vega and colleagues (1995) proceeded to include a socioeconomic factor in a broad array of acculturative stressors. The authors

measured the relationship of these stressors (language conflicts, acculturation conflicts, perceived discrimination, and perception of a closed society) to youth problem behavior assessed via both youth self-report and teacher reports. They once again found that, among foreign-born Latinos, language conflict was the only significant predictor of increased problem behavior at higher stress levels. U.S. born youth, on the other hand, showed significant increases in problem behavior with stress levels in three domains: Language conflict, perceived discrimination, and perception of a closed society. These findings suggest, as do the findings of Gil and colleagues (1994), that stress due to discrimination should be examined separately from other acculturation struggles, such as language.

Both of the studies by Vega, Gil and colleagues (1994; 1995) point to the likelihood that the effects of acculturative stress differ for U.S.-born and immigrant Latino youth, with U.S.-born youth seemingly more affected by discrimination and immigrant (or foreign-born) youth being more affected by stressors related to adapting to a new society. Most importantly, the deconstruction of Latino acculturative stress shows that perceptions of societal phenomena, such as racism and inequality, are key stressors that may lead to negative developmental outcomes, especially for U.S.-born youth. Although many previous studies have shown that such risk factors at the community and societal level can predict gang involvement and delinquency (Howell & Eagley, 2005; Matute-Bianchi, 2008; Zatz & Portillos, 2000), few researchers have begun to examine these risk factors as part of acculturative stress in the way that Vega and colleagues (1995) have, and hardly any have used mixed methods to more deeply understand these connections among U.S.-born and foreign-born Latinos. In the present study, we quantitatively examine the association between acculturative stress and gang involvement while also looking for potential risk factors related to this stress in short-answer qualitative data. Portes and Rumbaut's segmented assimilation theory (2001) and a related theoretical model by Vega and Gil (1999) provide a framework for this investigation.

A Segmented Assimilation Framework

Portes' and Rumbaut's (2001) segmented assimilation theory addresses societal hurdles facing Latino youth, considering their differential significance for U.S.-born Latinos and for those born abroad. These authors' research suggests that among the key factors determining whether acculturation of today's foreign-born immigrants will be successful are the history of those immigrating and the way in which the host country's government and society receives them. Present-day Latino immigrants are in a weak position in both respects:

they tend to come from a background of poverty, and the governmental and societal reception of them is largely hostile and prejudiced (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Particularly, those U.S.-born children of these immigrants who are exposed to a bifurcated labor market, inner-city neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, and racism are prone to “downward assimilation,” meaning they would assimilate to the lower socioeconomic rungs of U.S. society. Assimilating in this way increases the likelihood of delinquency such as gang involvement (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

An initial attempt at linking segmented assimilation theory to acculturative stress, as part of a model of delinquency predictors, has been made by Vega, Gil, Dimas, Zimmerman, Khoury, and Warheit (1994, 1995, 1999). In a 1999 literature review on substance abuse, Vega and Gil propose a model in which segmented assimilation is the starting point of immigrant youth’s acculturation. Depending on whether this individual’s assimilation is positive or resembles “downward assimilation” he/she will experience either reduced or higher acculturative stress, respectively. If the individual’s acculturative stress is high, this state increases his/her probability of substance abuse. The authors emphasize the need for research to test this more comprehensive model through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The present study employs a mixed methods approach to explore a portion of Vega and Gil’s proposed model, while focusing on gang involvement as a delinquent outcome variable. With this model as a guiding framework, we examine potential sources of discrimination stress and subsequent gang involvement among Latino middle school students in both quantitative and qualitative data. We hypothesized (a) that U.S.-born Latinos would be more likely be involved or active in gangs than immigrant youth, that (b) this involvement would be linked to higher levels of acculturative stress (both due to discrimination and cultural adaptation). In the qualitative analysis, we expected that (c) U.S.-born youth would be more likely to describe themes of racism and economic inequality/poverty in their descriptions and (d) youth experiencing high levels of acculturative stress (regardless of immigrant status) would be more likely to describe themes of racism and economic inequality/poverty in their descriptions.

Method

Participants

Data were drawn from the first wave of the Latino Adolescent Transitions Study ($n = 199$), which sampled youth aged 12 to 15, from a diverse middle school in metropolitan Atlanta. The school served a low-income community—more than

90% of its students qualified for federally subsidized lunch. Its racial/ethnic composition was 54% Latino, 24% African American, 14% Asian, 8% White, and <1% Native American. Of the study's participants, 52% were in seventh grade, the other 48% in eighth grade. The sample was 57% female. All students were either born in the United States (21%) or had moved to the United States around age 5 (17%), in elementary school (35%), or in middle school (27%). Out of the entire sample, 73% were of Mexican heritage, and the remaining youths were primarily from Central America, along with a few students of South American, and the Caribbean heritage. Sixteen percent came from single parent households.

Procedure

In order to explore these adolescents' cultural adaptation at home and in school as well as their general psychological well-being and risk profile, the study employed questionnaires using quantitative psychometric scales. In addition, the surveys included four short-answer qualitative questions regarding perceived similarities and differences between themselves and "Americans,"¹ and between themselves and other Latinos. Adolescents were recruited in their school cafeteria in both Spanish and English, with the researchers explaining the purpose of the study and offering a free movie ticket as an incentive for participation. All questionnaires included Spanish translations, which were established via an initial translation, back-translation, and a repeated comparisons procedure (decentering) to assure cultural sensitivity (Kuperminc et al., 2009). Spanish versions of assent forms and parental consent forms underwent the same translation process. The adolescents completed the surveys in their classrooms in small researcher-led groups of 10 to 15 students, with approximately half administered in Spanish and the rest in English. All questions were read aloud by the researcher to help account for different reading levels. Ethical standards for human subject research were adhered to at all times.

Measures

The quantitative portion of the study focused on measures of acculturative stress, gang involvement, gang delinquency, and immigration status. Once associations between these variables were established, themes relevant to quantitative results were identified in the short-answer qualitative data and converted to codes for acculturation stressors related to race and ethnicity as well as economic disadvantage.

Quantitative Measures

Acculturative stress. The adult version of Mena and colleagues' (1987) SAFE scale for acculturative stress was employed to measure acculturative stress, since the child version has only been validated for youth under the age of 10 (Chavez, Moran, Reid, & Lopez, 1997). This 24-item scale assesses a balance of SAFE stressors, as well as discrimination-related strains, on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from "not at all true" to "very true." Higher scores indicate higher levels of stress. The scale has been normed on young adult Latinos, with an overall internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.84$.

Roche and Kuperminc (2012) identified two subscales comprised of 18 items from the SAFE, using factor analysis. The first scale measures stress due to cultural adaptation and includes five items, with $\alpha = 0.75$. A sample item of this scale is "I don't feel at home in the U.S." The second subscale assesses discrimination stress with 13 items such as "I feel bad when others make jokes about or put down Latino customs." This scale has an internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.79$.

Gang activity. An abbreviated version of the Pillen and Hoewig-Roberson (1992) Gang Membership Inventory developed by Walker-Barnes and Mason (2001), served to measure the youths' gang activity. A four-point Likert-type scale ranging from "never" (0) to "five times or more within the past week" (3) was used to measure the frequency of respondents' gang-related behavior. Higher scores indicate more gang activity.

This scale includes two subscales, with three items assessing gang involvement. Walker-Barnes and Mason (2001) defined involvement as nondelinquent and nonviolent activities associated with gangs, including wearing gang colors on purpose, showing gang hand signs on purpose, and hanging out with a gang ($\alpha = 0.74$). Gang delinquency, on the other hand, included the illegal and violent activities of getting in a fight for a gang, selling drugs for a gang, and spray-painting gang symbols. These three items have an internal consistency of $\alpha = .83$.

Immigration status. Based on youths' self-reports of their country of birth, we classified participants as either U.S.-born or immigrant. All of the U.S.-born youth were the children of immigrant parents.

Qualitative Measures

The four short-answer vignettes included in the survey were originally employed to gain a deeper understanding of experiences that contribute to cultural identity development. Participants were asked: (a) "What makes you different from Americans?" and (b) "What do you have in common with

Americans?" The same questions were asked with respect to Latinos, that is, (c) "What makes you different from Latinos?" and (d) "What do you have in common with Latinos?" For the present study, responses to these questions were explored to identify potential sources of discrimination stress from a segmented assimilation perspective.

Plan of Analysis

Quantitative Analysis. Preliminary analyses of the associations between acculturation stress and gang activity were assessed using Pearson's correlations. Next, *t*-tests were used to determine differences in gang activity and acculturative stress by immigration status. Finally, hierarchical regressions were used to determine whether discrimination stress interacts with immigration status to predict overall gang activity, gang involvement, and/or gang delinquency. Covariates of the regression included gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

Qualitative Coding Procedure. For qualitative analyses, the lead author and a research assistant employed content analysis to code for themes related to discrimination stress and to segmented assimilation theory. These selected themes were not the most frequent in the sample, but were chosen from a theoretical standpoint and to elaborate on initial quantitative findings (see results section). After coding of approximately one half of the sample, new questions arose and the codes underwent a round of refinements. Following these changes, intercoder reliability was checked using a randomly selected subset of 25 participants, blindly selected by a third research assistant. Intercoder reliability was 86% for discrimination and prejudice. Economic disadvantage had an intercoder reliability of 50%.

In response to the low agreement on economic disadvantage, the code was further specified to distinguish between responses to commonality and difference questions as well as neutral and negative responses. A second test of intercoder reliability followed, this time with a random subset of 15 participants selected under the same conditions. The resulting intercoder reliability for economic disadvantage was 100%. After application of the new coding scheme, intercoder reliability for the entire sample was 83% for prejudice and discrimination and 74% for economic disadvantage. Disagreements between coders were resolved by discussion and consensus.

Qualitative Analysis. Frequencies of all codes were identified across the sample using content analysis in EZText. Notably higher frequencies of all codes occurred in response to the question "What makes you different from Americans?" Considering this tendency and the fact that this question was most

structured to reveal how these adolescents perceive themselves in relation to the majority culture, this item was chosen as the focus of the more in-depth qualitative analysis presented below. Codes for prejudice and discrimination, described in more detail in the results section, were collapsed into a single category due to the low frequency of discrimination. Indicators of economic disadvantage were found exclusively as a perceived difference between the self and Americans. An exploration of the responses in each of these dimensions revealed several salient themes complementing our quantitative findings.

Corroboration of Quantitative and Qualitative Measures. In order to identify whether the qualitative themes of economic disadvantage and prejudice may be sources of discrimination stress or relate directly to gang involvement, the frequencies identified through content analysis were measured in relation to our quantitative constructs using χ^2 analyses. First, the quantitative scales for both discrimination stress and gang involvement were converted into categorical variables using a median split. Frequencies of qualitative themes for all participants were then imported into the same SPSS file. χ^2 analyses allowed us to measure whether themes of economic disadvantage and prejudice were experienced more frequently among youth with high levels (above the median) of discrimination stress or gang involvement.

Results

Quantitative Results

Correlations. The association between overall gang activity and acculturative stress did not reach significance ($r = 0.02, p = .79$). However, there was a significant negative association of adaptation stress with overall gang activity ($r = -0.15, p = .04$). Adaptation stress was also negatively associated with gang involvement ($r = -0.16, p = .03$).

t-Tests. There was no significant difference in overall gang activity or in gang delinquency between U.S.-born and immigrant adolescents. U.S.-born youth reported slightly, but not significantly more gang involvement than immigrant youth. Immigrant youth reported significantly more overall acculturative stress ($t = -3.89, p = .00$) and adaptation stress ($t = -5.76, p = .00$) than U.S.-born youth.

Regression Analyses. Associations of overall gang activity and the subscales of gang involvement and gang delinquency with immigrant status and

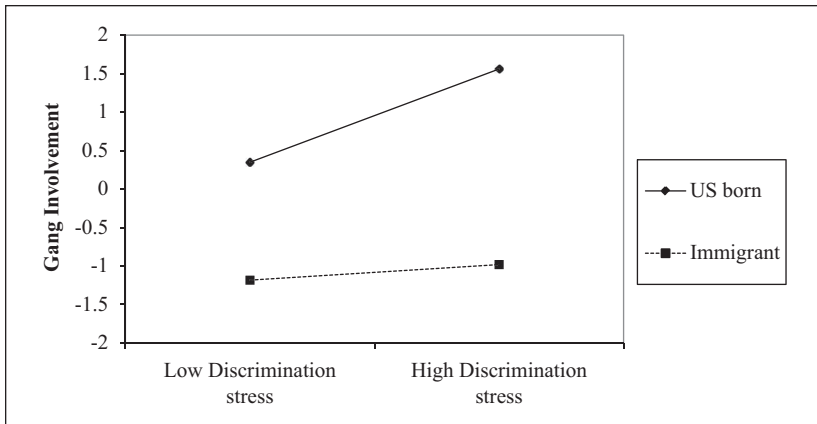


Figure 1. Interaction of immigrant status by discrimination stress on gang involvement.

acculturation stress were examined in regression analyses that first controlled sex, age, and Mexican origin. Low adaptation stress ($\beta = -0.50, p = .01$) and high discrimination stress ($\beta = 0.33, p = .04$) predicted overall gang activity. Significant covariates included older age ($\beta = 0.16, p = .03$), and being Mexican ($\beta = 0.17, p = .02$). Gang delinquency was significantly related to older age ($\beta = 0.17, p = .00$), Mexican origin ($\beta = 0.29, p = .02$), and being male ($\beta = -0.48, p = .02$). A significant interaction was observed between immigration status and discrimination stress ($\beta = -0.40, p = .01$), as displayed in Figure 1. In addition, there was a significant interaction between immigrant status and adaptation stress ($\beta = 0.41, p = .02$), as displayed in Figure 2. U.S.-born youth experiencing high levels of discrimination stress were more susceptible to gang involvement than those experiencing low levels of discrimination stress. For immigrant youth, discrimination stress was not a strong predictor of gang involvement. Unexpectedly, adaptation stress had a reverse effect: Higher levels of stress were related to lower gang involvement for U.S.-born youth than for immigrant youth. Table 1 presents the standardized B and *t* values resulting from this regression.

Qualitative Results

Unfortunately, many of the responses to the qualitative survey items consisted of one- or two-word answers, often limiting their interpretability. Despite this limitation, review of the data indicated the presence of two

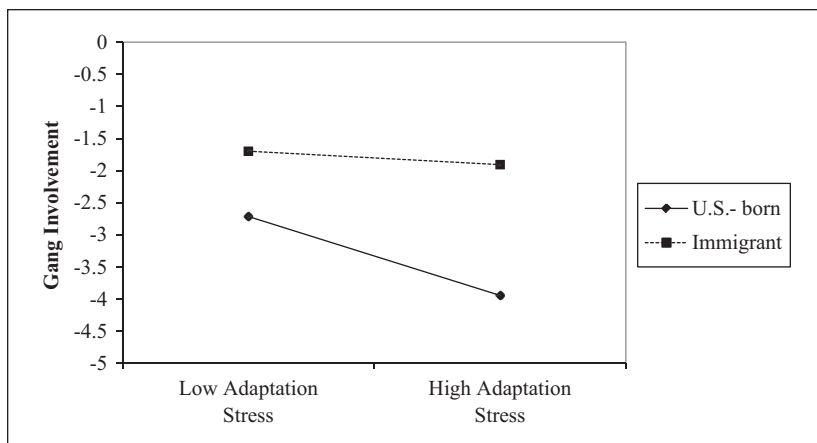


Figure 2. Interaction of immigrant status by adaptation stress on gang involvement.

Table 1. Regressions of Immigration Status and Acculturative Stress on Gang Activity.

	Overall gang activity				Gang involvement				Gang delinquency			
	B	SE	β	ΔR^2	B	SE	β	ΔR^2	B	SE	β	ΔR^2
1.				.06*				.03				.18**
Sex	-.09	.11	-.06		-.03	.15	-.01		-.22	.10	-.48*	
Age	.16	.07	.17*		.14	.10	.11		.09	.03	.17**	
Mexican origin	.29	.12	.17*		.28	.16	.12†		.26	.11	.29*	
2.				.04*				.06**				.01
Immigrant status	.01	.17	.01		-.05	.23	-.02		.11	.15	.12	
Adaptation stress	-.48	.18	-.50**		-.79	.25	-.61**		-.22	.17	-.77	
Discrimination stress	.41	.20	.33*		.95	.27	.55**		-.15	.18	-.48	
3.				.02				.04*				.01
Imm Status × adap str	.37	.22	.32†		.64	.27	.41*		.13	.19	.12	
Imm Status × discr str	-.32	.23	-.22		-.81	.31	-.40**		.22	.21	.16	
Total R²				.12**				.13**				.20*

Note: Unstandardized and standardized regression weights from final model. † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

metathemes and potential sources of discrimination stress aligned with significant phenomena as identified by Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) and Vega and colleagues (1995), including the importance of race and discrimination

as well as an increasingly bifurcated labor market and perceptions of a closed society. The metathemes identified in the qualitative data may be interpreted as the psychological perception and manifestation of these societal phenomena. They include prejudice, discrimination, and perception of economic disadvantage

Prejudice and discrimination. This metatheme included reports of discrimination or prejudice. Specifically, if the youth participant mentioned “mean looks at Latinos,” or “talking bad about Latinos,” such experiences were coded as *discrimination*. Statements such as “they are stuck up,” or “they hate Latinos,” on the other hand, were coded as *prejudice* since they refer to general attitudes rather than actions.

Only 6% of the adolescents reported discrimination or prejudice as a difference between themselves and Americans. These responses were generally evenly distributed between the genders (seven female, five male), but were again more common among immigrants than U.S.-born youth (10 out of 12 respondents) and among those of Mexican origin than those born elsewhere (11 respondents). These statements primarily focused on prejudicial attitudes surrounding race, that is, “Americans are racist.” Many adolescents seemed cautious to stereotype Americans, as they used disclaimers such as “some” and “a little” when making negative statements about Americans in their comparisons. For example, one adolescent responded that he was different from Americans in that “I don’t think I’m all that (some are nice).” There was a strong focus on the other rather than the self: Adolescents spoke of Americans’ prejudicial stances rather than their own experience of discrimination or prejudice as Latinos.

Economic Disadvantage. A further theme in the short-answer vignettes was a sense of economic shortcomings. Responses ranged from one-word answers, such as “money,” “jobs,” and “hardships,” to statements like “they are rich.” All of these answers were responding to questions about what makes the participants different from Americans.

Out of the entire sample, 13% ($n = 26$) reported economic disadvantage when asked what made them different from Americans. Sixteen of them were male, and 10 were female. Only three out of these 26 individuals, however, were U.S.-born, and 20 were of Mexican origin. Respondents focused largely on monetary holdings, indicated by multiple incidences of the one-word answer “money” and statements such as “Americans have more money” and “not being that rich.” Jobs were also an important focus, implied by responses such as “they get better jobs.” Finally, statements including “they have more possibilities than us,” and “we are not born with a social security,” seemed to

emphasize the unequal nature of the American dream. Adolescents generally emphasized Americans' advantage rather than their own disadvantage.

Corroborating Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Following qualitative analyses, a median split was performed on the quantitative scales for discrimination stress and gang involvement, converting them into categorical variables. Participants with scores above the medians (0 for *gang involvement*, 2.5 for *discrimination stress*) were henceforth considered to have "high" levels of the respective variable, and scores below the medians were considered "low." The Chi-square revealed that youth reporting economic disadvantage were significantly more likely to be gang-involved than those not reporting disadvantage ($\chi^2 (1, N = 198) = 6.87, p = .01$). Those experiencing high levels of discrimination stress were not more likely to report economic inequality ($\chi^2 (1, N = 198) = 0.18, p = .83$). A χ^2 test revealed no significant relationship between reports of prejudicial attitudes and discrimination stress ($\chi^2 (1, N = 198) = 0.00, p = 1.00$), or gang involvement ($\chi^2 (1, N = 198) = 0.18, p = .83$).

Discussion

The present study's quantitative findings present a nuanced picture of Latino youth gang involvement: Contrary to our first hypothesis, there were no significant differences in overall gang activity or delinquency between immigrant and U.S.-born youth, with higher nondelinquent gang involvement among U.S.-born youth being only marginally significant. Our second hypothesis, however, was partially confirmed: discrimination stress predicted higher levels of gang involvement, albeit only among U.S.-born youth. Conversely, higher adaptation stress was linked to significantly lower gang involvement among U.S.-born youth. These results are partially interpretable, yet also leave room for further investigation.

The significant interaction between discrimination stress and immigration status relates to previous findings by Gil and colleagues (1994) and Vega and colleagues (1995) that U.S.-born Latinos experience more negative repercussions of acculturative, particularly discrimination stress, including lower self-esteem and increased problem behaviors. This interaction also supports the assertion of Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) segmented assimilation theory that racism is an important challenge that can influence the likelihood of downward assimilation, a process in which gang involvement is more likely than in a positive integration experience. However, this interaction does not necessarily support the idea of U.S.-native Latinos being worse-off, since gang

involvement was not significantly higher among U.S.-born youth than among immigrants. Rather, the process leading to gang involvement seems to differ for the two groups.

The negative relationship between adaptation stress and gang involvement for both groups, and its significantly stronger nature for U.S.-born adolescent, adds further complexity to the present findings. For immigrant youth, there seems to be a pattern of acculturative stress not affecting their likelihood to become involved in a gang. This pattern suggests that they may not be as influenced by acculturative stressors as U.S.-born Latinos, despite being more perceptive of some of them. Explanations for this difference may be drawn from the theory of "immigrant optimism" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1995), which suggests that immigrant youth are better prepared to overcome obstacles in the United States because they have a former frame of reference (countries of origin) to compare it to, in which socioeconomic conditions were far worse. U.S.-born Latinos, on the other hand, grow up as a minority in their home country and have only known the difficulties of discrimination they experience here.

More difficult to interpret, however, is that U.S.-born youth with high adaptation stress were significantly less likely to become involved in gangs than those with low levels of adaptation stress. Vega and colleagues' findings show that language conflict, a key component of adaptation stress, may predict problem behavior among both U.S.-born and immigrant youth (1995). Moreover, Roche and Kuperminc (2012) identified that adaptation stress was related to lower GPA's for U.S.-born youth in the same Latino Adolescent Transition Study sample, and it has been shown that poor academic performance tends to heighten the likelihood of gang involvement (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Curry & Spergel, 1992; Howell & Eagley, 2005). One possibility that would help explain the current findings is that this form of acculturative stress was internalized rather than externalized. Prior studies indicate that characteristics of adaptation stress, such as limited English proficiency or language struggles in general, problematic family dynamics, and challenging intergroup relations are related to symptoms such as anxiety, symptoms of depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness (Alva & De los Reyes, 1999; Dawson & Williams, 2008; Pappamihel, 2001). Considering previous research evidence that U.S.-born Latinos have more negative academic and problem behavior outcomes than immigrant Latinos but experience less adaptation stress, research testing whether such stress is internalized more frequently than it is externalized may be warranted.

An additional interesting finding, though not the focus of our study, was that girls and boys were equally likely to report gang activity. However, while

reporting levels of overall gang activity and gang involvement similar to those of boys, girls did report less gang *delinquency* than boys. Girls were also fewer to report economic disadvantage (10 vs. 16), but equally likely to report discrimination and prejudice in qualitative data. This slightly challenges research on gang involvement that has focused more on males (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Vega et al., 1995; Zatz & Portillos, 2000) and suggests that girls should be included in studies on gang involvement so as to obtain more nuanced findings between genders.

Interpretation of Qualitative Results

Qualitative findings surrounding economic inequality lent only partial support to the present study's hypotheses. The themes of money and job availability largely reflect the bifurcated labor market problems addressed by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) as well as Smart and Smart (1995). The theme of an American dream reserved for others alludes to the "perception of a closed society" stressor, which was related to problem behaviors in the study by Vega and colleagues (1995). Similarly, the present study revealed an association between economic disadvantage and gang involvement, but not between disadvantage and discrimination stress.

These findings are consistent with past research indicating that economic hardship acts as a macro-systemic influence that limits positive alternatives to gang involvement rather than being internalized as a stressor (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Howell & Eagley, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zatz & Portillos, 2000). One counterintuitive finding is that the youths reporting economic inequality were primarily immigrants. This difference may in part be due to the proportionately low number of U.S.-born youth in the present sample. Considering the interaction between discrimination stress and immigrant status, however, this finding also indicates that economic disadvantage and discrimination work differently as gang involvement predictors. Whereas discrimination affects U.S.-born youth more harshly than immigrants, these results suggest that economic hardship puts both groups at risk for negative social outcomes.

Finally, reports of prejudicial attitudes and discrimination were surprisingly unrelated to discrimination stress. Although this finding may initially call into question the validity of measures employed in the present study, a closer look makes the absent relationship somewhat interpretable. The large majority of youths reporting prejudice and discrimination were immigrants, and these 12 individuals were a small minority of the sample. The discrimination portion of the SAFE scale, however, mainly assessed how much the

youths were bothered/stressed by incidences of discrimination, not whether they experienced it. Considering previous research on the stronger negative repercussions of discrimination for U.S.-born individuals (Roche & Kuperminc, 2012; Vega et al., 1995; Viruell-Fuentes, 2007), it may be that the small group of immigrants reporting prejudice and discrimination are aware of these issues but not as affected by them as second-generation youths. Moreover, the respondents primarily reported perceived prejudicial attitudes of Americans, which are a related but a distinct construct from the perceived incidences of discrimination evaluated in the SAFE scale.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations exist to the present study's findings. Aside from relying on cross-sectional data, the subscales derived from the SAFE scale have been validated in only one study (Roche & Kuperminc, 2012), limiting evidence for their construct validity. Furthermore, qualitative data consisted primarily of one-word-answers. In depth-qualitative interviews with gang-involved youths experiencing discrimination stress would likely have been more revealing.

Another limitation is the wording of the most salient short-answer vignette (What makes you different from Americans?). Although employed consciously to make youth reflect on what the label "American" means to them in their responses, this question does not necessarily clarify a comparison group for U.S.-born Latinos, all of whom have the right to American citizenship. Such wording may be a partial explanation for the prevalence of economic disadvantage and prejudice/discrimination themes among immigrants. Even for immigrant youth, however, the term "Americans" was unclear considering the multiethnic make-up of their school. Finally, these Latino adolescents were primarily of Mexican descent and restricted to Metropolitan Atlanta, limiting the interpretability of significant findings.

Further research might deepen the present analysis of discrimination stress and gang involvement by focusing only on U.S.-born Latinos but examining a variety of contexts, including cities where gangs are established and ones where their presence is just emerging. Future studies could also compare the role of economic inequality in gang involvement between immigrant and U.S.-born Latinos using more in-depth qualitative methodology.

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Note

1. This wording was used consciously in the original study as a means of eliciting youths' ideas about what it means to be "American."

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