


Fall 12-10-2017

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Self-Esteem in Spanish-Speaking Latinos in Northwest Ohio

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Abstract

Self-esteem is a widely-studied construct across many disciplines of social science. However, previous research regarding self-esteem and language barriers has focused primarily on children and adolescent populations, while much less research has examined this relationship among adults. The current study measures linguistic acculturation and self-esteem in both Latino and control adult samples. Hypothesis 1 states that participants in the Latino sample would report significantly lower self-esteem than the control sample. Hypothesis 2 states that linguistic acculturation levels in Spanish speaking Latinos would be positively correlated with self-esteem. Finally, a research question was addressed measuring the differences in self-esteem between foreign born and U.S. born Latino participants. Results partially supported hypothesis 2 by revealing a significant positive correlation ($r = .38$) between English skills and self-esteem in the Latino sample. Hypothesis 1 was not supported, and no differences in self-esteem were found between foreign and U.S. born Latino participants. The discussion highlights practical implications, limitations and future research needs.

Self-Esteem in Spanish-Speaking Latinos in Northwest Ohio

The Latino population in Ohio has grown by 89% since 2000 and currently comprises over 411,000 people (Ohio Development Services Agency, 2015). This growth has also been felt in other areas of the country and has called attention to the psychological consequences this population is living with in their new environments facing possible economic, social, and language barriers. The current literature places a large emphasis on the psychological consequences for children and adolescents instead of adults, and few psychological studies have focused on the impact that language barriers have on self-esteem. The goal of this study was to determine if there is a correlational relationship between language skills and self-esteem in a sample of Latino individuals from Northwest Ohio.

Self-esteem has been defined by Rosenberg as ones' sense of worthiness as a person. Self-esteem is only one part of an individual's psychological well-being, but it is one of the primary components of their self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979). Self-esteem is influenced by social interactions, and previous research has found that positive cultural exchanges influence an individual's self-concept and willingness to continue to build rapport with different groups (Valentine, 2001). The drastic increase in the Latino population in Ohio calls to question the impact this cultural or language interaction may have on the self-esteem of these individuals. The Latino population in Northwest Ohio experience cultural interactions everyday with the predominantly Caucasian and middle-class majority of the state.

Self-esteem is a widely-studied construct across many disciplines of social science. Literature suggest that high self-esteem is related positively with coping mechanisms, expectancies, goals, and behaviors which allow an individual to be productive. It is negatively associated with physical and mental health problems, antisocial behavior, and substance abuse (Bandura, 1982; Brown, 1998; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; DuBois & Tevendale, 1999; Flory, Lynam, Milich, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2004;

Harter, 1998; O'Connor & Vallerand, 1998; Robins, Tracy, & Trzesniewski, 2008; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Previous studies have shown that African-American students report the highest level of self-esteem, followed by Caucasian students and then Hispanic students (Bachman, O'Malley, Freedman-Doan, Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2011). This review of the literature focuses on a variety of influences which can impact Latino self-esteem.

Influences on Latino self-esteem

Biculturalism and Acculturation

Two relevant topics that have been the focus of previous research are the concepts of biculturalism and acculturation. Biculturalism is an indicator often used to predict the individual's ability to navigate between cultural contexts depending on the cultures they have been exposed to (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2007). By definition, bicultural individuals are people living at the juncture between two different cultures (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Biculturalism is a product of acculturation, or the changes that occur when an individual encounters two or more cultures. Acculturation has been defined as the process that occurs when two groups are in direct contact with one another, which results in a change of the original culture of one or both of the group cultures (Redfield, Lenton, & Herskovits, 1936). Most often, this process results in minority individuals adopting the dominant culture (Garcia-Vasquez, 1995). A bicultural orientation is present in people who prefer to speak both Spanish and English or who maintain both mainstream U.S. and traditional Latino customs (Torres & Rollock, 2009). Individuals are constantly trying to seek a positive identity, and when their native culture is devalued or challenged, the individual could respond negatively to the new culture (Bernal, Saenz, & Knight, 1991). An individual's self-esteem and personal identity affect their adaptation to a new culture and both of these factors are influenced by individual attitudes and behaviors (Kitayama & Markus, 1994).

Previous studies have found negative consequences associated with biculturalism which include intergenerational conflicts, family obligations, and societal pressures (Romero & Roberts, 2003). There is also research supporting a connection between greater mainstream orientation and higher self-esteem among Latino elementary age children (Gil, Vega, & Dimas, 1994), college students (Valentine, 2001), adults (Padilla, Cervantes, Maldonado, & Garcia, 1988), and older adults (Meyler, Stimpson, & Peek, 2006).

Discrimination

Discrimination is another influence that can affect the self-esteem of Latinos, or minorities in general. Research has found that if an individual has high ethnic identity along with high perceived discrimination, they will in effect suffer from low self-esteem. On the contrary, if an individual has low ethnic identity, the perceived discrimination does not have as strong of an impact (Meegan & Kashima, 2010). McCoy and Major (2003) conducted a study with Latino participants and found that the stronger the ethnic identification a participant reported, the more depressed emotion and perceived discrimination they reported over the lesser ethnic identified participants.

Meegan and Kashima (2010) used a sample of 80 international college students to study perceived discrimination and self-esteem. They exposed the participants to a discriminatory pervasive reading and then measured depressed affect and self-esteem. The findings showed that the individuals who identified with the group were more affected by the discrimination reading manipulation and then reported lower self-esteem. In a study of ambiguous vs. unambiguous discrimination, Cihangir, Barreto, and Ellemers (2010) found that ambiguous discrimination caused participants with low self-esteem to report more self-stereotyping, inferior task performance, and negative emotions than the participants with high self-esteem. This shows that researchers have not yet collectively determined the direction of

this relationship, whether low self-esteem causes these negative emotions of discrimination or the negative emotions of discrimination causes the low self-esteem.

Language Barriers

Language is a major link to an individual's ethnic culture and identity. Most of the research conducted in this field has involved child and adolescent participants, however the findings are still relevant in this review. During childhood and adolescence, language skills aid in socialization and emotional, cognitive, and behavioral self-regulation (Dale, 1996). In school systems, it is common for bilingual students with limited English proficiency to be ignored by the English-speaking students (Rice, Sell, & Hadley, 1991; Tabors, 1997). Studies in schools have also shown non-English speaking students are often spoken to "as babies" or in other condescending ways because of their English levels, which has a negative impact on the students' self-esteem (Alexander & Baker, 1992). One study examined the relationship between self-concept and bilingualism. They found that students who identified as biliterate reported higher self-confidence than those who identified as monoliterate (Huang, 1995).

In most school systems, there are limited numbers of teachers and counselors who can communicate with Spanish native speaking (SNS) students in their native language (Thorn & Contreras, 2005). There is a need for institutions such as school systems to adapt educational and mental health programs to aid in decreasing acculturative stress, which could cause psychological and behavioral difficulties (Tong, Huang, and McIntyre, 2006). Self-esteem is influenced by an individual's self-worth along with environmental and contextual situations (Khanlou, 2004). SNS Latino individual's face normal everyday troubles that majority individuals face such as economic hardships, stress, health problems, etc., but with the addition of the added barrier of language. Several studies have found that low English proficiency leads to lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of stress (Sotomayor, 1977; Rumbaut, 1985; Waggoner, 1991).

Frequently, parents tend to lag behind their children in acculturation time (Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008). This causes children to serve as interpreters by brokering for their parents, which leads to a role reversal in the family and the “parentification” of the children (Chun & Akutsu, 2003). A study conducted by Perez (2011) found that participants whose primary language is Spanish reported lower emotional well-being in school or workplace experiences than in family experiences. She attributes this to low levels of linguistic acculturation, and reports that lower levels of acculturation are associated with high family cohesion, meaning that the more focus placed on the native culture over the dominant culture, the stronger the family bond. She also reports that the more acculturated the individual, the more favorable well-being experiences in school or the workplace could be explained by the ability to communicate better in English. Overall, research in the psychological field of language barriers is lacking and the goal of the current study is to aid in filling this gap.

Current Study

There have been mixed results in research done to measure self-esteem in minority groups. Umana-Taylor, Diversi, and Fine (2002) attribute this to the demographic of the participants of these studies. A majority of these studies were conducted in the South or Southwest, where Latino minority students were actually the majority in their schools and communities. Because children develop their self-esteem by comparing themselves to their surroundings, these samples could have been biased towards higher self-esteem as opposed to Latino individuals in areas that are predominately Caucasian such as Northwest Ohio. Also, the majority of these studies focus on children and adolescents’ self-esteem. This is understandable, because this is the time in an individual’s life where their self-esteem is more easily impacted. However, it is also important to research the psychological well-being and self-esteem in adults.

The goal of the present study is to contribute to the literature by using adult participants, and also a demographic of individuals who live in a majority Caucasian area of the country. Based on prior research of Latino self-esteem in comparison to Caucasian and African-American self-esteem, it is hypothesized that

Hypothesis 1: Self-esteem in Spanish speaking Latinos will be significantly lower than a comparative sample of non-Latino participants.

Hypothesis 2: Linguistic acculturation levels in Spanish speaking Latinos will be positively correlated with self-esteem.

Research Question: Is there a significant difference in self-esteem levels of Spanish speaking Latinos who report not being born in the U.S. as compared to the self-esteem levels of Spanish speaking Latinos who report being born in the U.S.?

Through these hypotheses, the present study aims to expand the literature on adult self-esteem as well as Spanish native speakers, a population that has previously been underrepresented in research. In order to conduct this study in the best way possible for the participants, all forms including informed consent, surveys, debriefing, and directions will be given with the option of English or Spanish for all participants. In reference to the research question, the present study will examine whether there is a difference in the self-esteem levels of first generation immigrants as opposed to second, third, etc. generation Latinos.

Method and Materials

Participants

Participants included 32 Spanish speaking individuals over the age of 18 obtained from two Latino community organizations in Toledo, Ohio: Adelante and the Sofia Quintero Art and Cultural Center. The demographics of this sample represent to demographics of the individuals who seek services and attend programming through these agencies. This is a convenience sample of Latino adults who live in this area of the state. The study used a

comparison group of non-Latino participants also obtained from a convenience sample of students enrolled in a large lecture undergraduate social psychology class at Bowling Green State University. None of the participants received monetary compensation for participating. Undergraduate student participants received 3 points of extra credit towards their social psychology class.

Measures

The surveys that were administered included demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, and whether or not they were born in the United States. The constructs measured were self-esteem and linguistic acculturation. For the self-esteem items, the scale used was the Rosenberg self-esteem scale available in both English and translated into Spanish, verified by Rojas-Barahona, Zegers, and Forster (2009) with a Cronbach's alpha level of 0.75. The linguistic acculturation scale used was the Bidimensional Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (BAS) with 24 items developed by Marin and Gamba (1996) which measures language use, linguistic proficiency, and electronic media subscales using a Likert scale. The scale is available in both English and Spanish and has been verified with large and diverse Hispanic populations with a Cronbach's alpha level of .90 for Hispanic populations and .96 for non-Hispanic populations. A few sample items from each subscale of the BAS include: "How often do you speak English?", "How well do you read in English?", and "How often do you watch television programs in English?". The BAS also contains the previous questions in relation to Spanish.

Procedure

The surveys were administered in person at both agencies during the organizations' normal programming time. Participants were recruited using a recruitment script in both English and Spanish. The participants were given as much time as they needed to complete the surveys and were given the option of completing the survey in either English or Spanish.

Estimated time to complete demographic information and both surveys was approximately 10-15 minutes. For the non-Latino sample, the surveys were administered during one lecture of the class PSYC 3110.

Results

Demographic analysis of the control (N=79) and Latino sample (N=32) found the average age of all participants to be 30.63 years of age with a standard deviation of 17.857 and a range from 18 to 78 years of age. A total of 2 participants were eliminated from the control sample for qualifying as both of Latino heritage and who identified mostly “well” levels of Spanish proficiency on the linguistic acculturation scale. The total sample of all participant consisted of 32.7% male and 67.3% female. A test for reliability statistics concluded Cronbach’s Alpha levels above .85 for both measures administered.

An independent samples t-test was conducted and the demographics of the two samples proved to significantly different in age; $t(109) = -20.97$ $p < .05$. The mean age of the control participants was 20.72 years old, with a range from 18-37 and a standard deviation of 2.26. The Latino sample of participants had a mean age of 56.19 years old, with a range of 30-78 and a standard deviation of 14.80. Gender proved to be more consistent across the two samples, with 31% male and 69% female in the control group and 37.5% male and 62.5% female in the Latino group. The control group reported their race to be 77.8% Caucasian, 13.6% African American, 3.7% Asian, 1.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 3.7% other, which is similar to the overall racial distribution of undergraduate students at the university. The ethnicity of the control group was 95.1% non-Hispanic or Latino and 4.9% Hispanic/Latino (N= 4, 2 of which were excluded for sufficient levels of Spanish skills). For the Latino sample, 23 of the 32 participants did not indicate a race and only selected their ethnicity as being Hispanic/Latino. Of the 9 participants who selected a race, 7 selected

Caucasian and the other 2 selected other, writing in “Mexican American” and “Mexican”.

100% of participants in the Latino sample identified their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino.

Hypothesis 1: Self-esteem in Spanish speaking Latinos will be significantly lower than a comparative sample of non-Latino participants

With regard to hypothesis 1, an independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference between the self-esteem scores of the control sample ($M= 2.158$, $SD= .482$) and the Latino sample ($M= 2.230$, $SD= .484$); $t(109)= -.715$, $p=.476$. Thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2: Acculturation levels in Spanish speaking Latinos will be positively correlated with self-esteem.

Hypothesis 2 was supported regarding English acculturation, but not Spanish acculturation.

A correlation analysis revealed a significant correlation ($r= .384$) between the Non-Hispanic Domain, or English proficiency, and self-esteem in the Latino sample of participants ($r=.015$, $r<.05$). There was not a significant correlation between the Hispanic Domain, or Spanish proficiency, and Self-Esteem in the Latino sample ($r= .415$, $r>.05$). Therefore, higher English acculturation was positively correlated with self-esteem, but Spanish acculturation was not significantly related to self-esteem.

Research Question: Is there a significant difference in self-esteem levels of Spanish speaking Latinos who report being born outside of the United States as compared to the self-esteem levels of Spanish speaking Latinos who report being born in the United States?

An independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference between self-esteem scores of Spanish speaking Latinos born in the United States ($N= 23$, $M= 2.307$, $SD= .411$) and Spanish speaking Latinos born outside of the United States ($N=8$, $M= 2.000$, $SD= .366$); $t(29)= 1.556$, $p= .196$.

Discussion

Analysis of the data found that hypotheses one and the research question were not supported. However, hypothesis two was partially supported by showing a significant positive correlation ($r = .384$) between the Non-Hispanic Domain, or English skill level, and self-esteem in the Latino sample. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that lower English proficiency was related to lower self-esteem and higher levels of stress (Sotomayor, 1977; Rumbaut, 1985; Waggoner, 1991). It was theorized that these individuals are already facing stressors such as finances, work, or family but with the additional stress of a language barrier to also play a role in their self-esteem.

Hypothesis one was not supported as there were no significant differences in the self-esteem of the control sample and Latino sample. This is inconsistent with previous findings which reported that Latinos tend to report lower levels of self-esteem compared to Caucasians and African Americans (Bachman, O'Malley, Freedman-Doan, Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2011). I believe there could be confounding variables which led to the rejection of this hypothesis. First, the mean age of Latino participants was 36 years older than the control sample of undergraduate students, which could have affected the results. Also, there was 79 participants in the control group and only 32 in the Latino group which may have caused an issue in finding significant differences. Finally, females were overrepresented in both samples which could have affected the results.

Analysis of the research question had similar issues in comparing the two groups. Only 8 of the 32 Latino participants reported being born outside of the United States. With such a small sample, it is hard to draw any significant conclusions of the effect this has on self-esteem. Also, there may have been more participants who were born outside of the United States but who did not report this out of fear or anxiety if they are undocumented.

Some limitations of this study include the sample sizes and demographics of the participants. The Latino sample was significantly older and had a higher standard deviation than the control sample of undergraduate students and this could have played a role in their self-esteem, seeing as they are representing different generations. Another limitation of this study is that there were much more participants in the control sample as compared to the Latino sample, which could have skewed results.

The results of this study suggest that language barriers may have a significant impact on the self-esteem of individuals with lower English proficiency. I believe this can serve as evidence that lawmakers and the community must make more of an effort to be inclusive of individuals who are not comfortable using English, especially since the United States does not have an official language. If there were more resources and help available to Spanish speaking individuals, it may help alleviate some of the stress that these language barriers can cause. For example, many area hospitals and doctors' offices have switched from hiring in person translators and now use a computer translating program. If we could revitalize the usage of translators and advocates to help these Spanish speakers through medical, legal, or educational processes then that may serve to lessen the pressure or stress that they may be feeling in those types of situations where they are struggling to communicate. Some future research in this area may choose to evaluate the differences of cities or states with high levels of advocates and resources for Spanish speakers as compared to cities or states with low levels of these resources to see if this is a variable which could impact self-esteem or other psychological constructs.

Conclusion

A significant relationship was found between higher levels of English proficiency and higher self-esteem. This is consistent with previous research done in this field. With over 37 million Spanish speakers in the United States, it is important to consider how this language

difference may affect the psychological wellbeing of these individuals (Pew Research Center, 2013). This finding is significant in that it highlights the additional struggles that Spanish speakers endure, and suggests that more should be done to better address their needs.

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