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# Acculturative Stress and Gang Involvement among Latinos: U.S.-born versus Immigrant Youth

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# ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AND GANG INVOLVEMENT AMONG LATINOS: U.S.-BORN VERSUS IMMIGRANT YOUTH

by

ALICE N. BARRETT

Under the Direction of Gabriel P. Kuperminc

## ABSTRACT

Quantitative and qualitative data from the 2002 Latino Adolescent Transition Study were used to explore differences in acculturative stress and gang involvement between foreign-born and U.S.-born Latino middle school students. Regression analyses showed significant interactions between discrimination stress and immigration status as well as adaptation stress and immigration status. U.S.-born youths were significantly more likely to be gang-involved if they experienced discrimination stress. They were also less likely to be gang-involved if they experienced high adaptation stress. A minority of primarily foreign-born youths identified economic inequality and prejudicial attitudes as factors that differentiated them from Americans. Those reporting economic inequality were more likely to be gang-involved than those who did not. These findings suggest that the origins of gang involvement could differ between the two immigrant generations. Whereas U.S.-born Latinos may be more negatively affected by discrimination, foreign-born Latinos may be more sensitive to their comparatively low economic status.

**INDEX WORDS:** Latinos/Latinas, Acculturation, Juvenile gangs, Race and ethnic discrimination, Poverty

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U.S.-BORN VERSUS IMMIGRANT YOUTH

by

ALICE N. BARRETT

Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Georgia State University

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## **1. Introduction**

Over the past eight years, the number of youth gangs in the United States has increased by 28%. Of their 774,000 members, approximately 36% are under the age of eighteen, and approximately 50% are Latino (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006, 2008; Howell & Egley, 2005). With such a disproportionately large representation in a growing number of delinquent groups, 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 metropolises 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). In March 2010, twenty-six alleged members from the Atlanta area were indicted for violence and seven murders within the past four years. According to a review of police reports, the gang's presence has spread beyond Atlanta proper to several outlying suburbs. Among the many factors predicting gang involvement, research suggests that the acculturation experience and acculturative stress play a determining role for Latino youth. Moreover, the relationships 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.

### **1.1 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

literature review of longitudinal quantitative studies, Howell and Egley (2005) found that low community social capital and family problems in early childhood predicted later problem behavior and involvement with delinquent peers, which increased the likelihood of later gang involvement. Early adolescence is a crucial time at which the most risk factors seem to interact and predict later gang membership by mid-adolescence. These factors include drug presence 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 (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993). Howell and Egley (2005) note that these factors exist at multiple ecological levels: The individual, the familial, the micro-systemic (or immediate community), meso-systemic (where the community and one's family interact), and the macro-systemic level (including the societal, political, and economic contexts). Gang membership susceptibility increases with the quantity of risk factors as well as the amount of levels at which these factors exist.

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, and, in spite of being more lenient toward their children's gang membership, these parents expressed concern about the high levels of violence that gangs are now engaged in. Non-member parents felt reprehensive toward gangs, and these

attitudes were more common among foreign-born parents and those who did not hold strong traditional Mexican values. While many of the foreign-born mothers felt helpless in the face of gang activity or remained in denial that their children were involved, several U.S. – born women were active community advocates for stronger local law enforcement and other programs.

If Latino gang members feel they are protecting their communities, it is worth exploring reasons why they sense the need for such protection. Along with their generally low socio-economic status, obstacles associated with being an ethnic minority and an immigrant population cannot be ignored. Acculturative stress, for example, is a risk factor that may negatively influence emotional development, lower self-esteem and academic performance, and predict problem behavior among Latino youth (Kuperminc, Wilkins, Roche, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2009; Gil, Vega, & Dimas, 1994; 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.

## **1.2 Acculturative Stress**

Out of the many definitions of acculturative stress, Arbona and colleagues (2010) 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. This scale encompasses multiple types of stressors, including discrimination.

Inextricably connected to their unique immigration experience, acculturative stress among Latinos has several distinct characteristics. Among six of such Latino-specific stressors, Smart and Smart (1995) identify racial discrimination as well as reliance on agricultural labor, which is becoming increasingly scarce. Saldaña and Padilla (1995) also 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 SES experienced higher levels of distress.

Since racial discrimination appears to be an important stressor for Latinos, several researchers have examined it as a factor within their acculturative stress scale. Gil, Vega, and Dimas (1994), for example, examine the acculturative stress categories of language issues, discrimination, tension due to mismatching cultural values, and acculturative dissonance (differences in the rate of child and parent acculturation). They measured acculturative stress among middle school boys in metropolitan Miami and found that, although foreign-born immigrants experienced more 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) examined an even more distinct group of acculturative stressors and their relationship to youth problem behavior assessed via both youth self-report and teacher reports. The acculturative stressors Vega and colleagues measured included language conflicts, acculturation conflicts, perceived discrimination, and perception of a closed society. The authors 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 the previous study, that stress due to discrimination should be examined separately from other acculturation struggles, such as language. Interestingly, the latter two stressors were only significant for teacher reports. This difference may indicate that youth are more likely to act problematically outside the home and under the influence of peers, rather than under the supervision of the home, and are hence more evident to teachers.

Both of these studies indicate that acculturative stress works differently for U.S.-born and immigrant Latino youth, with U.S.-born youth seemingly more affected by discrimination. 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. Few researchers, however, have looked beyond the acculturative stress scale to understand these phenomena at a systemic level and the way in which they contribute to Latino youth's qualitative self-identification in relation to Americans. Segmented assimilation theory provides a societal framework that identifies the role of racism and inequality in the acculturation experience. This understanding, in turn, provides important themes to look for in the ways Latinos differentiate themselves from Americans, allowing for a richer understanding of acculturative stress formation and its relationship to gang involvement.

### **1.3 The Acculturation Process and Segmented Assimilation**

Acculturation can be defined as “the process of cultural and psychological changes that follow intercultural contact, including alterations in a group’s customs, their economic and political life,” (Berry, 2003) as well as “psychological changes such as alterations in individuals’ attitudes toward the acculturation process, their cultural identities, and their social behaviors in relation to the groups in contact” (Phinney, 2003). Evidently, this is a multidimensional process in which an immigrant’s host culture and his culture of origin interact at both societal and individual levels. Both of these levels and the ways in which they inform one another are critical for advancing understanding of the breadth of acculturation dynamics and how these differ for foreign-born immigrants as compared to U.S.-born children.

In segmented assimilation theory, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) primarily consider the societal factors that influence immigration and acculturation. They assert that the current waves of Asian and Latino immigrants cannot be expected to behave the same as previous European immigrant groups, as they arrive in a different societal context. For example, immigrants or U.S.-born Latinos who grow up in an inner-city neighborhood, marked by poverty and countercultures, will more likely to undergo “downward assimilation,” into an underclass of U.S. society where negative outcomes such as gang involvement are pronounced, than Latinos who grow up in wealthy suburbs. Portes and Rumbaut also argue that the bifurcation of the U.S. labor market due to a decline of medium-pay industry jobs has resulted in a large demand for low-paying service jobs. The sole alternatives tend to be white-collar jobs that require high levels of education. The increasing inequality provoked by this divide also predicts downward assimilation for those Latino youth who feel they must resort to the lower end jobs. Finally, the importance of race and persistence of discrimination in U.S. society also affects Latino youths’



ability to advance in this society. U.S.-born Latinos may merit the benefit of learning English and the ways of this society early on, but they often still confront the challenges of racial discrimination, inequality, and persistent exposure to countercultures. Portes and Rumbaut's analysis of these three acculturation challenges provide a clearer picture of societal acculturation stressors confronting Latino youth. With indications from their work and the previously discussed literature that these stressors are related to problem behavior, what is missing is a more in-depth analysis of how these societal stressors are understood by Latinos and through what processes they may lead to problem behaviors. Moreover, a specific look at gang involvement warrants attention, considering the significant threat gangs pose to American society. Few researchers have explored the process between segmented assimilation challenges, (i.e. racism, inequality, counterculture exposure) acculturative stress, and delinquency among immigrant and U.S.-born Latinos. Moreover, none have done so using a mixed methods approach that examines segmented assimilation challenges as themes in the qualitative comparisons Latinos make between themselves, other Latinos, and Americans.

#### **1.4 Segmented Assimilation, Acculturative Stress, and Problem Behaviors**

Some quantitative studies have linked societal phenomena to immigrant acculturative stress and Latino delinquency with support of Agnew's (1992, 2001, 2006) general strain theory (GST). Agnew relates the strains of rejection, neglect, or abuse by parents or peers, generally negative experiences in high school, criminal victimization, and discrimination encounters, to anger and subsequent delinquency (2001). Perez and colleagues examined this theory among Latino youth, specifying perceived discrimination, immigrant generation, intergenerational conflict, and English proficiency as strains specific to this ethnic group. Interestingly, they found being U.S.-born to be predictive of anger for youth living in areas of high Latino concentration,

whereas perceived discrimination and intergenerational conflict were related to anger in areas of low Latino concentration. Anger acted as a partial mediator to delinquency for most of these variables. Discrimination was directly related to delinquency for both groups but was fully mediated by anger for those in low Latino concentration areas. Although Agnew (2001, 2006) explains that in order to increase the likelihood of delinquency, strains must be perceived as unfair and outside of one's social control, neither he nor Perez and colleagues examine strains other than discrimination that exist at a societal level, such as economic inequality and counterculture exposure. A literature review by Vega and Gil (1999) on substance abuse, however, develops a framework in which acculturation proceeds as segmented assimilation, which in turn informs acculturative stress that predicts substance abuse. The authors point out that, while family plays a crucial role in Latino youth development, delinquency prevention programs must also consider and incorporate relevant community factors. They 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, examining potential sources of acculturative stress and subsequent gang involvement in qualitative data. These potential sources are hypothesized to reflect a downward assimilation process. Using 2002 data from the *Latino Adolescent Transitions* Study, conducted at a low-income middle school in metropolitan Atlanta, we test associations between discrimination stress, cultural adaptation stress, and gang involvement, as well as a possible moderating effect of U.S. nativity. Moreover, we look for themes of racial discrimination, economic inequality, and counterculture exposure in short-answer vignettes regarding how the youths feel similar and different from Latinos and Americans. After exploring these themes, we

quantitatively test whether the youths expressing them are more likely to experience discrimination stress and gang involvement. We propose that U.S.-born Latinos are more likely become involved in gangs due to perceived discrimination, inequality, and exposure to countercultures than immigrant youth.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

Data were drawn from the first wave of the Latino Adolescent Transitions Study (n = 199), which sampled youths aged 12 -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 7th grade, the other 48% in 8th grade. The sample was 57% female and 43% male. All students were either born in the U.S. (21%) or had moved to the U.S. 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, South America, and the Caribbean. Sixteen percent came from single parent households.

### **2.2 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 to such measures assessing acculturative stress, gang involvement, and U.S. nativity, the surveys included four short answer vignettes about the adolescents' identity, including, (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, i.e. (c) “What makes you different from Latinos?” and (d) “What do you have in common with Latinos?” The adolescents completed the surveys in their classrooms. 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). A copy of the relevant scales and open-ended questions, as presented to the participants, can be found in Appendix A.

## **2.3 Measures**

The present study focused on the quantitative measures of acculturation stress, gang involvement, gang delinquency, and U.S. nativity. Once relationships 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 surrounding race and ethnicity, economic disadvantage, and counterculture exposure.

### **2.3.1 Quantitative measures.**

*Acculturative stress.* The adult version of Mena and colleagues’ (1987) Social, Familial, Attitudinal, and Environmental 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 12. This 24-item scale assesses a balance of social, attitudinal, familial, and environmental stressors, as well as discrimination-related strains, on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all true” (1) to “very true” (4). Higher scores indicate higher levels of stress. The scale has been normed on young adult Latinos, with an overall internal consistency of  $\alpha = .84$ .

Roche and Kuperminc (2005) identified two subscales comprised of 18 items from the SAFE scale using factor analysis. The first scale measures stress due to cultural adaptation and includes five items, with  $\alpha = .75$ . 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  $\alpha = .79$ .

***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 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 ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Walker-Barnes and Mason (2001) defined involvement as non-delinquent and non-violent activities associated with gangs, in this case including wearing gang colors on purpose, showing gang hand signs on purpose, and hanging out with a gang. 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 previous research differentiating between the first and second generation as well as prior studies comparing the four different “age of arrival” groups (Roche & Kuperminc, 2005, Kuperminc et al., 2009), these groups were simplified into U.S.-born and immigrant youth. The latter group included all who had moved to the United States from abroad in their lifetime, regardless of age. Throughout the present paper, this variable will be referred to as “immigration status.”

### **2.3.2 Qualitative measures.**

The four short-answer vignettes included in the quantitative survey were employed to gain a deeper understanding of potential sources of discrimination stress. It should be noted that these short answer questions were not designed specifically for this study’s aim of unraveling

discrimination stress, but for a general understanding of the adolescents' ethnic identity. Moreover, many of the responses consisted of one-word answers, limiting the extent to which they can be interpreted as indicative of life stressors.

Despite these limitations, review of the data indicated the presence of three meta-themes aligned with Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) major challenges identified as facing the second generation (the importance of race, the bifurcated labor market, and concentration of lower-income immigrant youth in marginalized inner-city neighborhoods where countercultures prevail). The themes identified in the qualitative data may be interpreted as the psychological perception and manifestation of these societal phenomena. They include an awareness of racial and ethnic differences, perception of economic disadvantage, and exposure to countercultures. In addition to the descriptions below, the codebook used for qualitative analyses is included in Appendix B.

***Prejudice and discrimination.*** This meta-theme included reports of discrimination or prejudice. If the youth 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.

***Economic disadvantage.*** A further prevalent 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," and "some don't have food to eat." Many of these answers were responding to questions about what makes the participants different from Americans or Latinos, in which case they were coded as *economic inequality*. Since inequality within the Latino ethnic group is less obvious than that between Americans and

Latinos, economically related responses to “What makes you different from Latinos?” were only coded as inequality if they had a clear connotation of disadvantage.

If participants gave economically related responses to commonality questions such as “What do you have in common with Latinos?” these were coded as *poverty* only if they had clear indications of disadvantage. For example, “money,” in response to this question was not coded, but “hardships” was.

***Exposure to countercultures.*** This theme involving countercultures was evident among a minority of participants; however, it was deemed worthy of examination due to its relevance to the research questions. Responses revealing this theme included “we both have problems with gangs,” “they are cholos,” and “I like low-riders.” These were often not indications of the youths’ direct involvement in such countercultures (which would strongly overlap with the outcome variable) but simply the acknowledgement of their presence. The code for this theme included any mention of gangs, the word “cholo,” and “low-riders.”

## **2.4 Plan of Analysis**

**2.4.1 Quantitative analysis.** Preliminary quantitative analyses of the associations between different types of acculturation stress and gang activity were assessed using two-tailed Pearson’s *r* correlations. Next, *t*-tests were used to determine differences in types of gang activity and acculturative stress by immigration status. Finally, three hierarchical regressions were run 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.

**2.4.2 Qualitative coding procedure.** For qualitative analyses, both the author and a research assistant coded for the relevant themes using the codebook included in the Appendix B.

Once the codes had been established, a randomly selected subset of twenty-five participants' responses was initially coded to establish a general understanding of how the codes would be applied. Next, both coders proceeded with approximately one half of the sample, after which new questions arose and the codes underwent a round of specifications. Following these changes, the coders checked their inter-coder reliability using another randomly selected subset of twenty-five participants, this time selected by a third research assistant who was unfamiliar with the data and erased all respondent ID's to avoid coder bias with any previously coded items. Inter-coder reliability was 86% for discrimination and prejudice and 100% for counterculture exposure. Economic disadvantage, however, had an inter-coder reliability of 50%.

In response to the low agreement on economic disadvantage, the code was further specified to distinguish between poverty and inequality as well as neutral and negative responses. Following these specifications, the coders proceeded with a second test of inter-coder reliability for economic disadvantage, this time using a random subset of fifteen participants selected under the same conditions. The resulting inter-coder reliability for economic disadvantage was 100%. Both coders subsequently revised their previously coded data and completed coding of the remaining items in line with the new coding scheme. Inter-coder reliability for the entire sample was 83% for prejudice and discrimination 74% for economic disadvantage, and 100% for counterculture exposure. Disagreements were decided upon by consensus between the coders.

**2.4.3 Qualitative analysis.** Frequencies of all codes were identified across the sample, and noticeably higher frequencies of all codes in responses to the question "What makes you different from Americans?" indicated that it was the most salient out of the four vignettes. Moreover, the counterculture exposure dimension was dropped due to its low frequency, economic inequality and poverty were collapsed due to the low frequency of poverty, and the



prejudice and discrimination codes were similarly collapsed due to the low frequency of discrimination. An exploration of the responses in each of these dimensions revealed several salient themes. In order to identify whether these constructs may be sources of discrimination stress or relate directly to gang involvement among the second generation, both discrimination stress and gang involvement were converted into categorical variables using a median split and chi-square analyses were employed.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quantitative Results

**3.1.1 Correlations.** Although there was no significant relationship between overall gang activity and acculturative stress, there were significant negative associations of adaptation stress with overall gang activity ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ ) and gang involvement ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ ). A positive relationship between discrimination stress and gang involvement was marginally significant ( $r = .12, p < .10$ ). All correlations can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1  
*Correlations Among Types of Acculturative Stress and Gang Involvement*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Acculturative stress	1.0					
2. Adaptation stress	0.72**	1.00				
3. Discrimination stress	0.88**	0.44**	1.00			
4. Gang activity overall	0.02	-0.15*	0.08	1.00		
5. Gang involvement	0.04	-0.16*	0.12†	0.91**	1.00	
6. Gang delinquency	-0.01	-0.09	-0.02	0.80**	0.49**	1.00
Mean						
Standard Deviation						

Note. †  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**3.1.2 T-tests.** As presented in detail in Table 3.2, overall gang involvement and gang delinquency did not significantly differ for U.S.-born youth as opposed to immigrant youth. Gang involvement was marginally more prominent among U.S.-born adolescents ( $t = 1.93, p < .10$ ). There was significantly more overall acculturative stress ( $t = -3.73, p < .001$ ) and adaptation stress ( $t = -5.80, p < .001$ ) among immigrant youth than among those who were U.S.-born.

**3.1.3 Regression Analyses.** For overall gang activity, only older age ( $\beta = 0.04, p < .01$ ) and low adaptation stress ( $\beta = -0.50, p < .05$ ) were significant predictors. Gang delinquency was also significantly related to older age ( $\beta = 0.19, p < .01$ ) as well as Mexican origin ( $\beta = 0.30, p < .01$ ). The most interesting findings were within the regression for gang involvement, where a significant interaction was observed between immigration status and discrimination stress ( $\beta = -0.41, p < .01$ ), as displayed in image 1. In addition, there was a significant interaction between immigrant status and adaptation stress ( $\beta = 0.43, p < .05$ ), as displayed in image 2. U.S. – born youth experiencing high levels of discrimination stress were more susceptible to gang involvement. For immigrant youth, discrimination stress was not a strong predictor of gang involvement. Interestingly, 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 3.3 presents the standardized B and t values resulting from this regression.

Table 3.2  
*Significant Differences in Gang Activity and Acculturative Stress between Immigrant and U.S. born Youth*

Scale	Total M( <i>SD</i> )	U.S.-born M( <i>SD</i> )	Immigrant M( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i>
Gang activity	0.41 (0.78)	0.54 (0.93)	0.37 (0.73)	1.21
Involvement	0.54 (1.06)	0.81 (1.43)	0.46 (0.93)	1.93†
Delinquency	0.27 (0.71)	0.26 (0.63)	0.28 (0.73)	-1.13
Acculturative stress	2.37(0.50)	2.11 (0.53)	2.44 (0.48)	-3.73***
Adaptation	2.52(.81)	1.91 (0.73)	2.68 (0.76)	-5.80***
Discrimination	2.41(.61)	2.28 (0.67)	2.44 (0.60)	-1.43
Age	14.0 (0.80)	14.0 (0.81)	14.0 (0.8)	

*Note.* †  $p < .10$ .      \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3  
*Regressions of Immigration Status and Acculturative Stress on Gang Activity*

	Overall Gang Activity				Gang Involvement				Gang Delinquency			
	B	SE	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	B	SE	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	B	SE	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
1.				0.26				0.22				0.20
Sex	-0.08	0.11	-0.15		-0.07	0.16	-0.01		-0.18†	0.10	-0.39	
Age	0.18	0.07	0.04**		0.18†	0.10	2.13		0.17	0.06	0.19**	
Mexican origin	0.23	0.12	0.22†		0.06	0.17	0.04		0.27	0.11	0.30**	
2.				0.03				0.05				0.01
Immigration status	-0.16	0.15	-0.16		-0.28	0.21	-0.21		-0.02	0.14	-0.03	
Adaptation stress	-0.17	0.08	-0.50*		-0.25	0.12	-0.55*		-0.08	0.08	-0.26	
Discrimination stress	0.16	0.11	0.46		0.35	0.14	0.72*		0.00	-0.10	-0.01	
3.				0.01				0.03				0.01
Immigration status x Adaptation stress	0.38†	0.21	0.30		0.63	0.28	0.43*		0.10	0.20	0.09	
Immigration status x Discrimination stress	-0.03	0.24	-0.02		-0.82	0.32	-0.41**		0.18	0.22	0.13	

*Note.* †  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p = .001$ .

Image 3.1

*Interaction of Immigrant Status by Discrimination Stress on Gang Involvement*

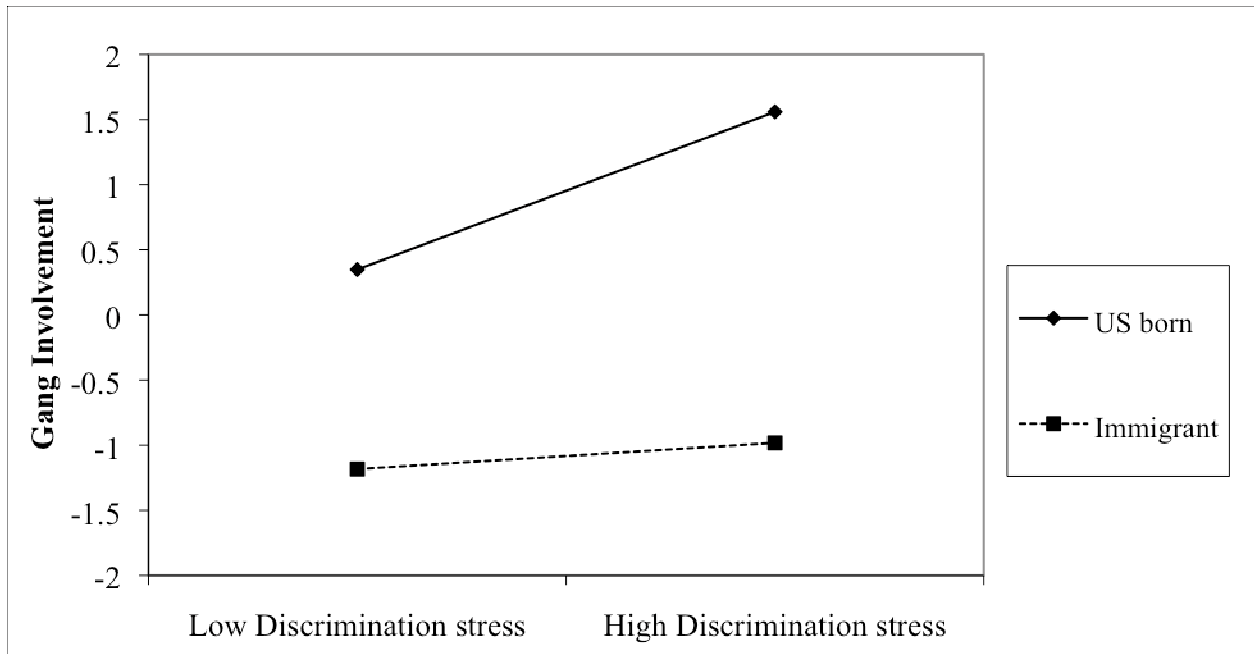
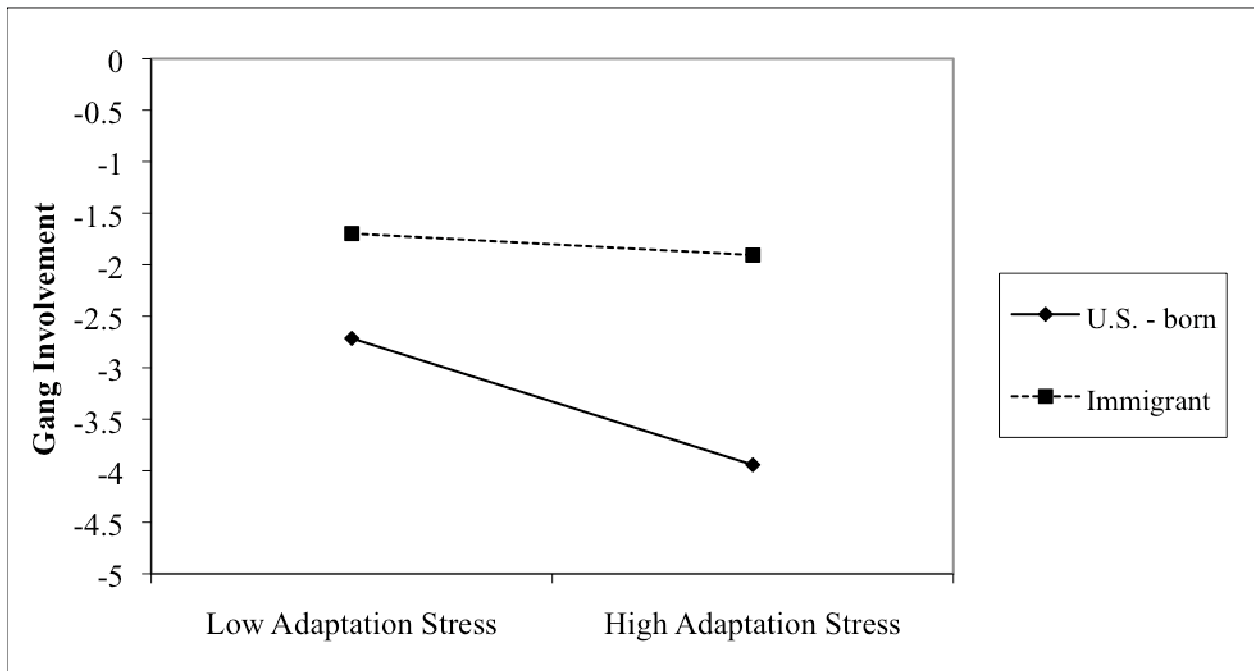


Image 3.2

*Interaction of Immigrant Status by Adaptation Stress on Gang Involvement*



## 3.2 Qualitative Results

**3.2.1 Economic disadvantage.** Out of the entire sample, 13% reported economic disadvantage when asked what made them different from Americans. Sixteen of them were male, and ten were female. This difference was marginally significant (Chi-Square (1,  $N = 198$ ) = 4.23,  $p = .06$ ). Only three out of these twenty-six individuals, however, were U.S.-born. Twenty of them 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. A median split and Chi Square test for discrimination stress and gang involvement revealed that youth reporting economic disadvantage were significantly more likely to be gang involved than those not reporting disadvantage (Chi-Square (1,  $N = 198$ ) = 6.87,  $p = .01$ ). Those reporting discrimination stress of 2.5 or higher on a scale from 1 to 4 were not significantly likely to report economic inequality (Chi-Square (1,  $N = 198$ ) = 0.18,  $p = .83$ ).

**3.2.2 Perceived discrimination and prejudice.** 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 (ten out of twelve respondents) and those of Mexican origin (eleven respondents). These statements were primarily focused on prejudicial attitudes surrounding race, i.e. “Americans are racist.” Many adolescents seemed cautious to lump all

Americans into one category, as they used disclaimers such as “some”, and “a little”, as in the response “I don’t think I’m all that (some are nice).” Again, there was a strong focus on the other rather than the self: Adolescents spoke of Americans’ prejudicial stances rather than the Latino experience thereof. A Chi Square test revealed no significant relationship between reports of prejudicial attitudes/discrimination and discrimination stress (Chi-Square (1,  $N = 198$ ) = 0.00  $p = 1.00$ ), or gang involvement (Chi-Square (1,  $N = 198$ ) = 0.18  $p = .83$ ).

#### **4. Discussion**

While confirming several of the hypotheses and pre-existing findings, this study’s results also brought up questions warranting 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 stress, particularly stress related to discrimination. In these studies, such stress predicted both lower self-esteem and increased problem behaviors among U.S.-born youths. Similarly, U.S.-born youths in the present study’s sample were more likely than immigrants to be involved in gangs if they experienced discrimination stress.

This interaction also supports the assertion of Portes and Rumbaut’s (2001) segmented assimilation theory that differential treatment based on race 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, the present study’s results do not necessarily support the idea of a worse-off second generation, 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 significant interaction between adaptation stress and gang involvement adds further complexity to the present findings. Although Gil and colleagues' (1994) work suggests that adaptation stress may be more common among immigrant Latinos, Vega and colleagues' findings show that language conflict, a key component of adaptation stress, may predict problem behavior among U.S.-born and immigrant youths. The present study's negative relationship between adaptation stress and gang involvement for both of these groups, and its significantly stronger nature for U.S.-born adolescents, are hence puzzling. Moreover, Roche and Kuperminc (2005) identified that adaptation stress was related to lower GPA's for U.S.-born youth in the same Latino Adolescent Transition Study sample. Considering that poor academic performance tends to heighten the likelihood of gang involvement (Howell & Egley, 2005; Curry & Spergel, 1992; Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993), the interaction seems even more counterintuitive. One possibility is that the effects of this form of acculturative stress were internalized rather than externalized. Prior studies indicate that characteristics of adaptation stress, such as LEP status or language struggles, problematic family dynamics, and challenging intergroup relations are related to symptoms such as anxiety, symptoms of depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness (Dawson & Williams, 2008; Pappamihel, 2001; Alva & De los Reyes, 1999). 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 examining whether such stress is internalized more frequently than it is externalized may be warranted.

#### **4.1 Interpretation of Qualitative Results**

Qualitative findings surrounding economic inequality lent only partial support to the present study's hypotheses and segmented assimilation theory. 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). Moreover, the theme of an American dream that is not for everyone 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 a relationship between perceived economic inequality and gang involvement. However, perceived economic inequality was not related to discrimination stress.

These findings indicate that economic hardship may act as a macro-systemic influence that limits positive alternatives to gang involvement rather than being internalized as a stressor, a hypothesis supported by the literature (Howell & Egley, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zatz & Portillos, 2000; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). 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 racial/ethnic discrimination work differently as predictors of gang involvement. Unlike the indication that discrimination affects U.S.-born youth more harshly, these results suggest that economic hardship puts immigrants as well as U.S.-born youth at risk for negative social outcomes.

Finally, reports of prejudicial attitudes and discrimination were surprisingly unrelated to reports of 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 twelve individuals were a small minority of the sample. The discrimination portion of the SAFE scale, however, assessed how much the youths were

bothered or stressed by incidences of discrimination, not whether they were experiencing it. Considering previous research on the stronger negative repercussions of discrimination for U.S.-born individuals (Vega et al., 1995; Viruell-Fuentes, 2007; Roche & Kuperminc, 2005), it may be that the small group of immigrants reporting prejudice and discrimination by Americans are aware of these issues but not as stressed by them as second-generation youths. Moreover, the respondents primarily reported perceived prejudicial attitudes of Americans, which are related to but a distinct construct from the perceived incidences of discrimination evaluated as stressors in the SAFE scale.

#### **4.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Several limitations to the present study's findings should be noted. It relied on cross-sectional data, and the separation of the SAFE scale was only recently conducted and validated in one study (Roche & Kuperminc, 2005), limiting the evidence for the construct validity of the discrimination and adaptation stress measures. Furthermore, the qualitative data consisted primarily of one-word-answers. More in depth-qualitative interviews with gang-involved youths or with those experiencing discrimination stress would likely have been more revealing of factors underlying these two constructs. This lack of methodological precision alludes to the larger issue of using previously collected data for new research questions.

Due to prior collection of the data, the wording of the short-answer vignette that emerged as the most important (What makes you different from Americans?) was also problematic. 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 themes of economic disadvantage and prejudice/discrimination arising primarily among immigrants. Even for immigrant adolescents, however, the term "Americans" may have been unclear

considering the multiethnic make-up of their school. Finally, the Latino adolescents in this sample 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 as well as ones where their presence is only emerging. Future studies could also compare the role of economic inequality in gang involvement between immigrant and U.S.-born Latinos using groups that are closer in size and a more in-depth qualitative methodology.

### **4.3 Policy Implications**

The present findings hold several implications for schools and social policy. At middle schools, diversity initiatives as well as clearly articulated policies against discriminatory treatment may help prevent gang-involvement among second-generation youth. Moreover, policy-makers overseeing gang prevention and intervention initiatives should support a holistic approach that includes economic support and well-equipped schools for disadvantaged students as well as culturally sensitive programs that acknowledge the specific issues facing U.S.-born and immigrant Latinos.

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## APPENDIX A

### Quantitative Measures

#### Acculturative Stress Scale (ASQ) (Mena et al., 1987)

##### ASQ




		Not At All True	Slightly True	Somewhat True	Very True
1.	I feel bad when others make jokes about or put down Latinos. <i>Me siento mal cuando otros se burlan ó dicen cosas malas de los Latinos.</i>	1	2	3	4
2.	I have more problems to overcome than most people do. <i>Yo tengo más problemas que solucionar que otras personas.</i>	1	2	3	4
3.	It bothers me that my family does not understand my new American values. <i>Me molesta que mi familia no entienda mis nuevos valores norte-americanos.</i>	1	2	3	4
4.	People in my family who I am close to have plans for when I grow up that I don't like. <i>Algunos familiares cercanos hacen planes para cuando yo sea grande que a mí no me agradan.</i>	1	2	3	4
5.	It is hard to tell my friends how I really feel. <i>Es difícil decirle a mis amigos como me siento realmente.</i>	1	2	3	4
		Nada Cierto	Ligeramente Cierto	Algo Cierto	Muy Cierto
6.	It bothers me to think that so many people use drugs. <i>Me molesta pensar qué tanta gente usa drogas.</i>	1	2	3	4
7.	It bothers me that some of my family does not live near me. <i>Me molesta que algunos miembros de mi familia no vivan cerca de mí.</i>	1	2	3	4
8.	I sometimes feel that being Latino(a) makes it hard to get a good job. <i>Algunas veces siento que por ser Latino(a) se me hace más difícil obtener un buen trabajo.</i>	1	2	3	4
9.	I don't have any close friends. <i>No tengo ningún(a) amigo(a) cercano(a).</i>	1	2	3	4
10.	Many people have stereotypes about Latinos and treat me as if those things are true. <i>Muchas personas tienen ciertas ideas acerca de los latinos (estereo-tipos) y a mí me tratan como si esas cosas fueran verdad.</i>	1	2	3	4

ASQ

		Not At All True	Slightly True	Somewhat True	Very True
11.	I don't feel at home in the United States. <i>No me siento como en mi casa aquí en los Estados Unidos.</i>	1	2	3	4
12.	People think I am shy when I really just have trouble speaking English. <i>Algunas personas piensan que soy tímido(a) cuando la verdad es que tengo problemas al hablar inglés.</i>	1	2	3	4
13.	I often feel that people try to stop me from improving myself. <i>Con frecuencia siento que hay personas que tratan de evitar que yo me supere.</i>	1	2	3	4
14.	It bothers me when people pressure me to be like everyone else. <i>Me molesta cuándo la gente me presiona a que sea como todas las demás personas.</i>	1	2	3	4
15.	I often feel ignored by people who are supposed to help me. <i>Muchas veces siento que me ignoran las personas que supuestamente están para ayudarme.</i>	1	2	3	4
		Nada Cierto	Ligeramente Cierto	Algo Cierto	Muy Cierto
16.	Because I am Latino(a) I do not get enough credit for the work I do. <i>No me dan suficiente crédito por el trabajo que hago, porque soy latino(a).</i>	1	2	3	4
17.	It bothers me that I have an accent. <i>Me molesta tener un acento.</i>	1	2	3	4
18.	It's hard to be away from the country that my family is from. <i>Es duro estar lejos del país de donde vino mi familia.</i>	1	2	3	4
19.	I often think about my cultural background. <i>Pienso frecuentemente acerca de mi cultura.</i>	1	2	3	4
20.	Because I'm Latino(a), I feel that others(neighbors, students) don't include me in their activities. <i>Siento que por ser latino(a), hay personas (vecinos, estudiantes) que no me incluyen en sus actividades.</i>	1	2	3	4
21.	Being with my family in a public place makes me feel really different. <i>Cuando estoy con mi familia en un lugar público, me siento realmente diferente a los demás.</i>	1	2	3	4
22.	People look down on my Latino customs. <i>Algunas personas no respetan mis costumbres latinas.</i>	1	2	3	4
23.	I have trouble understanding others when they speak English.	1	2	3	4



*Me cuesta trabajo entender a otros cuando hablan ingles.*

24	I feel at home here in Georgia. <i>Me siento como en mi casa aquí en Georgia.</i>	1	2	3	4
		Nada Cierto	Ligeramente Cierto	Algo Cierto	Muy Cierto
					

*Gang Activity Scale* (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001, from Pillen & Hoewig-Roberson, 1992)

**AB**

		Nunca	1 o 2 Veces	3 o 4 Veces	5 o Más Veces
4.	I wore gang colors on purpose. <i>Usé los colores de la ganga a propósito.</i>	0	1-2	3-4	5+
7.	I spray painted gang symbols. <i>Pinté con spray símbolos de ganga.</i>	0	1-2	3-4	5+
		Never	1 or 2 Times	3 or 4 Times	5 Times or More
11.	I showed gang hand signs on purpose. <i>Hice señales de ganga con las manos a propósito.</i>	0	1-2	3-4	5+
14.	I sold drugs for a gang. <i>Vendí drogas para una ganga.</i>	0	1-2	3-4	5+
17.	I took part in a fight as part of a gang. <i>Participé en una pelea como parte de una ganga</i>	0	1-2	3-4	5+
22.	I hung out with a gang. <i>Anduve con una ganga (pandilla, banda).</i>	0	1-2	3-4	5+

## Qualitative Measures

### AQ

1. What three things do you have in common with Americans?  
¿Qué tres cosas tienes en común con los(as) Americanos(as)?

A.

---

B.

---

C.

---

2. What three things make you different from Americans?  
¿Qué tres cosas te hacen diferente de los(as) Americanos(as)?

A.

---

B.

---

C.

---

3. What three things do you have in common with Latinos?  
¿Qué tres cosas tienes en común con los(as) Latinos(as)?

A.

---

B.

---

C.

---

4. What three things make you different from Latinos?  
¿Qué tres cosas te hacen diferente de los(as) Latinos(as)?

A.

---

B.

---

C.

---



## APPENDIX B

### Sequoia Qualitative Data Codebook

#### Research Questions:

- 1) What are potential sources of Discrimination-linked Acculturative Stress?
- 2) Are second-generation Latinos who experience high levels of Discrimination-linked Acculturative Stress more likely to experience downward assimilation stressors than their first-generation counterparts?

➔ Codes to be assigned to “chunks” of three responses to each the following questions:

1. What three things do you have in common with Americans?
2. What three things make you different from Americans?
3. What three things do you have in common with Latinos?
4. What three things make you different from Latinos?

➔ Final Codes to be entered and added using EZText Software

➔ For each chunk, assign all codes for which (a) relevant term(s) appear.

➔ Assign each code only once per chunk, whether the relevant term appears once or multiple times.

#### Acculturative (Discrimination) Stressors (linked to segmented assimilation)

##### (1) Economic Disadvantage

(1-1) *Perceived economic inequality*: In response to questions 2 OR 4 (differences), mention of:

- what we/I do not have (little of)
- what they have (more of)
- what we/I cannot do
- what they can do

- economic benefits/disadvantages: (money, papers, travel rights, jobs)\*\* and hardships

Ex: “they are rich”

\*\*Neutral one-word answers in parentheses ONLY to be coded if in response to question 2.

**(1-2) Perceived poverty: In response to questions 1 OR 3 (commonalities),** mention of :

-what we/I do not have( little of)

-what we/I cannot do

- other economic **disadvantages**: hardship, poverty, lack of basic necessities

\*\*This code DOES NOT apply to one-word answers “money,” “jobs,” or “papers,” as these do not clearly convey disadvantage. One-word answers that ARE ACCEPTABLE include “hardships,” “poor,” or other words that clearly indicate disadvantage.

Ex: “some don’t have food to eat”

(2) Notice of racial/ethnic differences

**(2-1) Physical features** – specific mention of the terms "color", "skin color", "eye color", "hair", "light," "dark," or any other physical trait

Ex: “my skin color,” “hair,” “dark”

**(2-1a) Mention of race** – explicit use of the term “race”

Ex: “my race”

**(2-2) Racial labels** – explicit use of the terms “mestizo,” “white,” “mulatto,” or “black”

Ex: “mestizo,” “they are white”

**(2-3) Perceived discrimination** – mention of how they are being treated unfairly or looked down upon, specifically reference to discriminatory actions, including: mean looks, talking about Latinos and/or use of the terms “make fun of,” “racist remarks” as well as any synonyms of these expressions.

Ex: “te ven feo”

**(2-3a)** *Perceived prejudicial attitudes* – mention of how a group holds attitudes of superiority that are not actions, i.e. : racist, “think they are better,” “snobby,” “hate,” “mean”

Ex: “some are racist”

**(2-3N)** *Negated perceived discrimination*- reference to the ”perceived discrimination” concepts/terms preceded by a negation

Ex : « We do not say mean things about Americans, » « they do not discriminate against Latinos »

**(2-3aN)** *Negated prejudicial attitudes* - reference to the “perceived prejudicial attitudes” concepts/terms preceded by a negation

EX : « they are not racist »

**(2-4)** *Ethnic labels*

**(2-4a)** *Latino Collective Ethnic labels* – explicit use of the terms « Hispanic, » or « Latino » to describe oneself or a group. This does NOT include description of a custom/activity, mention of « Latin America » as an entity/birthplace or any nationality (i.e. Mexican).

Ex : « I am Hispanic »

**(2-4b)** *Latino Nationality labels* – explicit reference to a nationality, such as « Mexican ,» or « Guatemalan» to describe oneself or a group. This does NOT include description of a custom/activity, mention of a country as an entity/birthplace or any of the collective labels above.

Ex : « I am Mexican »

**(2-4c)** *American Ethnic labels* – explicit use of the terms « American » or « gringo/a » to describe oneself or a group. This does NOT include description of a custom/activity mention of the United States as an entity/birthplace

Ex : « I am American, » « They are American »

**(2-5)** *Language* – specific use of the terms « language ,» « speech, » « speaking ,» « talking ,»\* « dialect, » « Spanish, » and/or « English .»

\*For « speaking » and « talking ,» do NOT code for mention of **amount** of speech (i.e. « I talk a lot ,» but DO code for mention of **ways** of speaking (i.e. « the way I talk »).

Ex : « I speak Spanish,»

**(2-5a) Accent-** mention of the word « accent »

Ex: « my accent »

**(3) Counterculture awareness:** Specific mention of gangs, drugs, organized crime, reference to “cholos” or “low-riders”

Ex: “We both have problems with gangs”