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## **Integrating the Best of Both Worlds: Details from Mexican-Origin College Students about Their Bicultural Identities and Adjustment Experiences**

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# **Integrating the Best of Both Worlds: Details from Mexican-Origin College Students about Their Bicultural Identities and Adjustment Experiences**

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## **Abstract**

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What influences the successful bicultural adjustment of ethnic minority adolescents into the mainstream American culture? While previous research has indicated that the most successful adjustment process involves the forging of new identities combining characteristics from both the culture of origin and the new culture, there is little exploration into the details of this process from the perspective of minorities who have successfully achieved bicultural adjustment. In order to determine whether bicultural adjustment is an evident as well as a consciously valued process among minority adolescents, we conducted in-depth written surveys with open-ended questions of 20 Mexican-origin college students. By focusing on high-achievers as measured by college attendance, we aim to highlight key elements of the cultural adjustment process that lead to positive outcomes for ethnic minority adolescents. The survey results provide rich evidence in the participants' own words about the complex nature and value of bicultural adjustment. These findings can inform adjustment efforts of ethnic minority adolescents as well as the institutions and community organizations who serve them.

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**Keywords:** bicultural adjustment, immigrant integration, acculturation



# **Integrando lo mejor de ambos mundos: Detalles de las identidades biculturales y experiencias de ajustamiento de estudiantes universitarios de origen mexicano**

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## **Resumen**

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¿Que influye en el éxito de ajustamiento cultural de adolescentes de minoría étnica hacia la cultura dominante Norteamericana? Mientras investigaciones anteriores sugieren que el proceso más exitoso es el ajustamiento bicultural por lo cual minorías étnicas esencialmente forjan nuevas identidades combinando características de la cultura de origen y la nueva cultura, hay poca exploración de los detalles de este proceso en perspectiva de aquellos que han realizado el ajustamiento bicultural. Para determinar si el ajustamiento bicultural es evidente y conscientemente valorado en adolescentes de minoría étnica, nosotros llevamos a cabo 20 encuestas profundas de estudiantes universitarios de origen mexicano. Enfocándonos en estudiantes destacados, medido por su asistencia universitaria, nosotros aspiramos resaltar elementos claves en el proceso de ajustamiento cultural que guían resultados positivos para adolescentes de minoría étnica. Los resultados de las encuestas proveen fuerte evidencia en las palabras propias de los participantes sobre la naturaleza compleja y el valor del ajustamiento bicultural. Estos descubrimientos pueden informar esfuerzos de integración de adolescentes de minoría étnica al igual que a las instituciones y organizaciones comunitarias que los atienden.

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**Palabras clave:** ajustamiento bicultural, integración de inmigrantes, aculturación



## Introduction

What influences the successful bicultural adjustment of ethnic minority adolescents into the mainstream American culture? While previous research has indicated that the most successful adjustment process involves the forging of new identities combining characteristics from both the culture of origin and the new culture (Organista, Marín, & Chun, 2010; Yang, Byers, Salazar, & Salas, 2009), there is little consensus on the details of this process drawing from the perspective of minorities who have successfully achieved bicultural adjustment (Alegria, 2009; Cabassa, 2003). In order to determine whether bicultural adjustment is an evident as well as a consciously valued process among minority adolescents, we conducted in-depth written surveys with open-ended questions of 20 Mexican-origin college students. The survey results provide rich evidence in the participants' own words about the nature and value of bicultural adjustment. Through detailed discussion of ethnicity, cultural identity, language, aspects of American and Mexican cultures, and advice for future newcomers to the U.S., the participants each report having experienced aspects of and/or having a preference for bicultural adjustment. These findings can inform adjustment efforts of ethnic minority adolescents as well as the institutions and community organizations who serve them.

Latinos comprise the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Mexicans are the largest group of origin among U.S. Latinos, comprising nearly 65% (Motel & Patten, 2010). Approximately 16% of all children enrolled in primary education are of Mexican origin and this proportion is expected to almost double by 2050 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). While the proportion of Mexican-origin individuals obtaining a college degree or higher by age 25 has increased steadily since 1970, only 10.9% had achieved this level of education in 2010 compared to 13.9% for all Hispanics and 29.9% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Given that more Mexican-origin adolescents are attending American academic institutions than ever before, the analysis of the bicultural adjustment process is critical to efforts to support and promote higher

education among Mexican students and other ethnic and racial minorities (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Organista, Marín, & Chun, 2010; Yang et al., 2009;). Large-scale quantitative studies of the bicultural adjustment process among Mexican-origin, Latino, and immigrant college students have yielded important findings about the measurement and dimensions of bicultural adjustment (Birman, 1998; Iturbide, Raffaelli, & Carlo, 2009; Schwartz, Kim, Whitbourne, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, Forthun, Vazsonyi, Beyers, & Luyckx, 2013; Schwartz, Waterman, Umaña-Taylor, Lee, Kim, Vazsonyi, & Williams, 2012; Yang et al., 2009). Viruell-Fuentes (2007) analyzed qualitative data from 40 in-depth interviews with female Mexican immigrants which contributed to a better understanding of group-level forces in the acculturation process. Drawing from the example of Viruell-Fuentes (2007), this study aims to enhance the understanding of bicultural adjustment of Mexican-origin college students by focusing on their own accounts and perceptions of the process. As noted by Cabassa (2003, p. 143), “Research in this area needs to move forward by combining different methods (qualitative and quantitative techniques) to create a better knowledge base for understanding what influences this process”. As Alegria (2009, p. 998) states, “More importance needs to be given to how acculturation happens in different contexts... and the interactions that lead to successful and healthy integration in U.S. society”. The goal of this study is to explore the cultural adjustment of high-achieving Mexican-origin adolescents in their own words.

In addition, many studies examining the bicultural experiences of Mexican adolescents in the U.S. focus on addressing the needs of students and communities with low educational outcomes (Espinoza, Gillen-O’Neel, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2013; Landale, McHale, & Booth, 2009). Conversely, this study seeks to learn from the experiences and insights of high achieving Mexican adolescents as measured by their enrollment in higher education. As such, this study aims to highlight key elements of the cultural adjustment process that lead to positive outcomes for ethnic minority adolescents.

## Bicultural Adjustment

Migration theories have outlined numerous typologies of cultural adjustment (Lafromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Lopez-Class, Castro, & Ramirez, 2011; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Ethnic minorities commonly experience mental and emotional distress due to the push-and-pull tensions between original and mainstream cultures (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Greenman & Xie, 2008; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). Cultural adjustment experiences can be negative either due to discrimination, rejection of the new culture, or inadvertent loss of one's original culture (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Dettlaff, Eerner, & Phillips, 2009).

Bicultural adjustment has been theorized to minimize the strain of adjustment while maximizing the potential for success in mainstream American society (Lafromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Organista, Marín, & Chun, 2010). To best understand the facets of biculturalism, it is useful to compare it to two other theories of adjustment: acculturation and assimilation. Each of these processes is characterized by incorporation of ethnic minorities in American society; nevertheless, they represent important differences across the range of possibilities for cultural adjustment. *Acculturation* focuses on adaptation of the individual in a new society as a separate reality from one's culture of origin; *Assimilation* incorporates the individual in American society by in essence eliminating the culture of origin; *Biculturalism* is a process by which an individual successfully integrates both new and old cultures in a dynamic enrichment or enhancement of identity. Below, these processes are discussed in turn.

*Acculturation* is the process through which members of a minority group interact with members of the dominant culture and adopt new practices while either breaking away from their culture of origin entirely or keeping that part of their identity separate and apart from the new culture (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Organista et al., 2010;). One either loses the culture of origin or lives in two separate worlds. While individuals who acculturate may manage to preserve their original cultural identities as distinct from their practices within the new culture (i.e., language, customs, and traditions), they would be aware of constantly having to shift from one identity to the other.

*Assimilation* is defined as the process by which minority group members more fully adopt the new mainstream culture as they integrate socially and economically (Alba & Nee, 2005). While contemporary assimilation theory posits that the mainstream culture is also changed by the presence of newcomers, one who assimilates essentially loses much of the culture of origin, and replaces it with the dominant group's culture. This process virtually requires elimination of an individual's original cultural identity in order for he or she to "make it" in the new mainstream society. While assimilation can have advantages for social and economic success in a new culture over the long term, individuals can have difficulties making the transition and suffering the loss of their original culture. This loss of culture is non-reversible as the individual becomes a full-fledged member of the host culture (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Djajic, 2003; Yang et al., 2009).

Research findings show that acculturation and assimilation can produce negative health behaviors and mental health problems among adolescent minorities (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Organista et al., 2010). When immigrants replace their culture by assimilating, they lose the ability to explore opportunities and utilize resources from their culture of origin. Meanwhile the break from the culture of origin and shift to the new culture can be extremely disruptive and difficult. Bacallao and Smokowski (2009) explained that adolescents go through an "ethnic fight" when the dominant culture dethrones the culture of origin, and results in negative social and emotional consequences such as stress or depression.

*Biculturalism*—also known as *Integration*—suggests that a newcomer may incorporate the dominant culture within his or her original cultural identity (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Organista et al., 2010). Bicultural individuals have the ability to effectively merge their two identities; they can draw on various characteristics within their identity from either the culture of origin or the new culture depending on the situation. Additionally, an individual may not be aware of any shift in identities as can take place in the acculturation process, but rather may see his/her integrated identity as natural, having created a new cultural identity comprised of fundamental elements from each culture. Distinct from acculturation and assimilation, biculturalism emphasizes maintenance and integration of both original and new cultures. Further, biculturalism is parallel to the concept of

transnationalism; in other words, immigrants who adapt to the U.S. society via this model maintain multiple relations with members from the ethnic community and dominant society (Sanchez & Machado Casas, 2009).

According to Bacallao and Smokowski (2009), some Mexican adolescents overcome linguistic and social challenges by creating friendships with American adolescents and by learning to speak English. If relationships with Americans are established, they can be very instrumental to language acquisition and the overall cultural adjustment process. Those American adolescents who established friendships with immigrants were found to show interest in learning the Mexican culture, therefore easing the adjustment process for some Mexican-origin adolescents (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009). Similarly, Dettlaff, Earner and Phillips (2009) confirmed in their study of Mexican-origin adolescents that individuals who lack interactions with the host culture face more challenges adapting to the new culture than those who are able to establish friendships and contacts.

As noted above, research suggests that the best approach to adjustment in American society in terms of physical and mental well-being is by creating a dual or bicultural identity (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Organista et al., 2010; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). Evidence shows that bicultural immigrant children, when compared to those who are fully assimilated, show lower levels of stress and depression. Moreover, studies have shown that adolescents with bicultural identities show more school interest and achieve more educational goals given their greater level of confidence in their cultural adjustment (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). Investigating the adjustment methods of Mexican-origin college students can inform researchers about the factors and experiences that these academically successful individuals valued in their path towards adjustment in the mainstream U.S. culture. By examining college students we can better comprehend what factors influence their social and academic accomplishments, which may serve to inform the adjustment of other minority adolescents.



## **Methods**

We conducted an in-depth written survey among Mexican-origin college students at a university in the West (unidentified here in order to maintain confidentiality of survey participants). In this study, participants are individuals of Mexican descent born in Mexico or in the United States who received at least part of their primary education in the United States (and thus experienced at least part of the adjustment process as an adolescent). In addition, in order to focus on the characteristics and experiences reflective of successful cultural adjustment, the sample was limited to college students. Survey participants were recruited through a university campus cultural center serving Latino students at the university.

The analysis involves a type of mixed-method approach. As explained by Creswell and Clark (2007, p. 6), “mixed method research involves both collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data”. Included in the survey are qualitative open-ended questions complemented by more quantitative type questions including demographic information and Likert-scale items. While the sample is not large enough to conduct statistical analysis, the value of the mixed method approach for this survey lies in the collection of both participants’ own accounts and perspectives on their cultural adjustment as well as answers to more fixed questions which inform the characterization of respondents’ adjustment process.

Surveys were collected during a two-month time period in 2010. The survey instrument measured the nature of cultural adjustment of the respondents as well as their perspectives on and experiences with bicultural adjustment. The cross-sectional survey instrument (available upon request) consists of 27 questions written by the researchers. Participants completed the survey privately in writing; the survey was estimated to take 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The first set of questions asked demographic information about the respondents (i.e., name, place of birth). Further questions asked participants about their personal adjustment experiences in the U.S. (e.g., When you first attended school, do you remember having problems adjusting from your culture and norms of your home environment to the classroom environment?). Open-ended items on the questionnaire allowed for free expression of respondents. For example, participants were

encouraged to explain their answers to several questions; in addition, some other questions asked participants to generate and rank their own list of answers.

**Participant Characteristics**

Twenty Mexican-origin college students participated in the study. Table 1, below, provides background information about the survey respondents.

Table 1.  
*Summary of Participant Characteristics (n=20)*

<b>Average age (years)</b>	21.1
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	10
Male	10
<b>Year in School</b>	
Freshman	2
Sophomore	6
Junior	3
Senior	6
Graduate Student	3
<b>Average G.P.A.</b>	2.7
<b>Place of Birth</b>	
U.S.	15
Mexico	5
<b>Parents' Place of Birth</b>	
U.S.	3
Mexico	17

Among the participants there were ten males and ten females. The average respondent age was 21 and there were two freshman, six sophomores, three

juniors, six seniors, and three first-year graduate students who had just graduated from college. The majority (fifteen of twenty) participants were born in the U.S. but lived in Mexico for part of their childhood. The remaining five participants came to the U.S. from Mexico at very young ages. Seventeen of twenty participants reported that their parents were both born in Mexico. Among the three participants whose parents were born in the U.S., all are bilingual in Spanish and English and one speaks only Spanish.

## **Findings**

Analysis of survey responses revealed that all twenty study participants—consistent with previous studies—experienced bicultural adjustment as demonstrated by their discussion of their own identities as well as responses to questions of ethnicity, language preference, language use, and advice to future newcomers to the U.S. Nearly all (nineteen of twenty) reported that biculturalism is the best way to adjust to and participate in American society. In this section, we present our data and summarize details about bicultural identity and adjustment in our participants' own words.

### **Bicultural Experiences and Preferences**

Table 2, below, presents a summary of the findings suggesting evidence of bicultural adjustment and preference among the survey participants. Reflective of bicultural adjustment, many of the participants preferred to speak both English and Spanish (fourteen of twenty), while four preferred Spanish and two preferred English.

Many of the participants (thirteen of twenty) reported “Mexican and American” as their ethnic identification, while the remaining seven respondents indicated their ethnicity as “Mexican”.

When asked to indicate their cultural identification within a range of provided options, ten participants identified with a “Mexican and American” cultural identity, six participants culturally identified as “fairly Mexican”, and the remaining four participants culturally identified as “fully Mexican”.

None of the respondents self-identified as “fully American”. Interestingly, there was no observable pattern across responses about language preference, ethnicity, and cultural identification in terms of being able to consistently map participants’ responses across the questions.

Table 2.  
*Evidence of Bicultural Adjustment (n=20)*

<b>Ethnic Identification</b>	
Mexican and American	13
Mexican	7
American	0
<b>Cultural Identification</b>	
Fairly Mexican	6
Full Mexican	4
Mexican and American	10
Fairly American	0
Full American	0
<b>Preferred Language</b>	
Spanish	4
English	2
Spanish and English	14
<b>Shift Identities?</b>	
Yes	7
No	9
Not applicable (Fully Mexican identity)	4
<b>Best Way to Adjust?</b>	
Lose Mexican culture	0
Keep Mexican culture	1
Integrate both Mexican and American cultures	19

As displayed above in Table 2, when asked whether or not participants shift between Mexican and American identities, nine of the sixteen participants who reported being both Mexican and American said 'no', and seven said 'yes.' Despite this apparent split in responses, examination of the written comments by respondents reveals bicultural adjustment even among those who do not feel a shift in identities takes place. Of those who said no, they do not shift, the common sentiment was that a truly new identity had emerged from the synergy of Mexican and American influences. One respondent wrote, *No, I don't think I shift, I think I created a new identity.* Similarly another wrote: *No, I am myself, I don't feel like I shift, I am a mix of both cultures.* Another stated: *No, just be myself.*

Among the respondents who said yes, a shift between Mexican and American identities does take place, the common sentiment was that having to shift is part of the bicultural adjustment reality. For example, one participant stated: *Yes, it is natural process to change identities, but it depends on the environment.* Another stated: *Yes, everyone who is multicultural does.*

Correspondingly, the participants were asked if they disagree or agree with a study that concluded that adolescents who integrate both cultures are better off than those who remained fully Mexican or became fully American. The question explained how the study found that Mexican-origin children who erase their Mexican culture or avoid the American culture showed more stress than children who are bicultural. All of the participants agreed with the study; all twenty participants explained how integrating both cultures is less stressful. Many responses mentioned that participating in both cultures gives a sense of belonging in both cultures which yields unique benefits compared to individuals who are not bicultural. A participant explained why he agrees with the study: *Yes, because integrating into both cultures will help you fit into both cultures. It is easier or less stressful when you are part of a culture because you feel like you belong.* Another wrote: *Yes, people who are bicultural are more open-minded and take on opportunities... If you are living in a place where integrated cultures exist, but are continuing to*

*isolate yourself, or close yourself off, you are not getting the best of both worlds.* Another participant explained how being bicultural is beneficial, by allowing more opportunities to succeed:

I would classify myself as a bicultural person. There is nothing more powerful or as effective as a person who can balance cultural dynamics. Having both cultures knowledge does not limit you to either culture, it in fact opens up more opportunities to succeed.

### **Preservation of Culture of Origin**

Survey responses revealed the importance of preservation and often celebration of Mexican culture among participants. On a scale of “very appreciative” to “not appreciative”, the vast majority of respondents (eighteen of twenty) identified as being “very appreciative” of their Mexican heritage, while one participant was “fairly appreciative” and one was “appreciative”. No respondents reported being not appreciative of their Mexican culture. This is a particularly important finding given that nearly all respondents (eighteen of twenty) reported having been discriminated against because of their ethnicity and provided examples. Participants expressed pride in speaking Spanish. One of the participants explained:

I am very proud of my first language and of who I am. And actually most of the time when people find out that Spanish is my first language they seem to like it and start questioning me about things and pronunciation in Spanish.

Another participant explained how the ability to speak Spanish is beneficial in American society:

I feel [that speaking Spanish] is an advantage. I have dealt with situations where most people would not speak it since it would seem

discriminatory but I've made it clear that I speak both, I don't see how can [speaking Spanish] be looked down upon.

One participant shows pride in speaking Spanish and the importance of feeling comfortable with their personal cultural identity: *I am proud of my language and one of the biggest things I've learned in life is that you need to be comfortable and proud of who you are and do not let anyone make you feel inferior.*

As an indicator of closeness to one's Mexican roots, participants were asked how often they visit Mexico. A total of fifteen of the twenty participants reported visiting Mexico with some frequency: eight participants reportedly visit Mexico at least once a year, five visit once every two years, and two visit at least once every three to five years. A participant who was born in the U.S. but lived in Mexico until the age of twelve explained how she stays in contact with family in Mexico to overcome feeling homesick:

I have a lot of family there, but we are always in contact through phone or e-mail. We usually try to go at least once a year to visit. The best way to overcome [feeling homesick] is to remember all the great things we have here [in the U.S.].

### **Building Factors of the Bicultural Identity**

Participants were asked to list factors that they believe comprised their bicultural Mexican and American identity. Surprisingly, many of the responses of each individual intertwine both Mexican and American identities. For example, more than half of the participants (twelve of twenty) mentioned food as a factor that constructs their Mexican identity, while ten participants mentioned food as a factor that builds their American identity. Seven of the twenty participants noted food in both lists. Music was another aspect that was present in both identity constructions of respondents. In both lists, half of the participants mentioned music as a feature that makes them

Mexican and American. In addition, another characteristic that was found to build the identities of participants was language. Eight respondents mentioned language in both the Mexican identity list and the American identity list. Among other responses that five or fewer participants mentioned in both lists were; traditions, celebrations, beliefs, culture pride, religion, sports, and television.

There were two other important factors: one found only in the Mexican identity list and the other present only in the American identity. Family was a feature that was only found to build and form participants' Mexican identity, none of the participants mentioned family as a feature that constructs their American identity. In addition, in an open-ended question that asked participants what was a major difference between the two cultures, seven of the twenty participants mentioned how the Mexican culture is more family-oriented. For instance, a respondent wrote: *Mexican culture seems to be heavily family oriented, decisions are always made with families. American culture is more individualistic.* Another participant expressed the same idea: *I think Mexican culture is a lot more family oriented, and is not looked upon as negative to have your son or daughter living with you even if they are over thirty.*

In the formation of an American identity, participants only mentioned education as a characteristic that makes them American. This factor echoes research findings that one reason many immigrants migrate to the U.S. is to give their children better life opportunities and a better education (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009; Landale et al., 2009).

The open-ended questionnaire asked all participants to explain how they managed to adjust to school life in American society. One participant mentioned one influence that helped during the adjustment process after moving from Mexico to the U.S.:

It was the most traumatizing experience of my life because I never expected it to be so different. The hardest thing was that I did not speak any English and that I did not have friends with me. There



was only one other kid in my grade that spoke Spanish, so I became his friend and he always helped me a lot.

A participant who was born in Mexico mentioned the advantage of having a Spanish-speaking teacher when arriving to the U.S.: *It was a little bit easier for me because my teacher spoke Spanish. Everything was so different, but my teacher made it easier for me!* Another participant who was born in Mexico explained the support that friends offer: *Friends were always a big support to me. Whether it was staying after school to help me do homework or hanging out to teach me more of their [English] language.* One U.S.-born participant explained how a bilingual school is a positive factor that helped during the adjustment process: *I struggled a little at first with not speaking too much English. What helped me adjust was going to a bilingual school where some students and some teachers spoke Spanish.*

The university attended by the survey respondents is comprised of a predominantly white student population. Mexican-origin students make up a small proportion. Latino students represent nearly ten percent of the total student population at the university where the study was conducted. Participants were asked what helped them achieve college enrollment; numerous participants felt that self-motivation was a major influence, while others mentioned family, friends and school programs. Nearly all participants (nineteen of twenty) mentioned that their family was a major influence in helping them achieve college enrollment. Similarly, Bacallao and Smokowski (2009) found that parents support the value American society places on academic success within adolescents; moreover, they clarified how friends are also a big factor to become academically successful. One student described how family and motivation helped him/her to seek and attain college enrollment: *I had a lot of motivation from my parents, knowing my family moved to better out lives, gave me the power and strength that I need to continue school. I didn't want to be another negative statistic.* Another participant discussed the role of family support: *My family has always pushed me to pursue higher goals, they made sure I*

*did not end up in a negative environment.* A third participant mentioned after-school programs as a factor that helped provide access to college:

What has helped me achieve this goal is by taking advantage of pre-collegiate programs. Without the help of these programs I don't think I would be where I am now. Receiving the support from my family and friends also helped me achieve this goal.

In the responses of the participants, the participants described three types of positively influential friends: friends who are experiencing a similar adjustment process, friends who in the past adjusted, or welcoming American friends in the classroom. Participants built these friendships through school, sports, and after school programs. One participant discussed how friendships with Americans helped in interacting better with American society: *These friendships helped me a lot. I learned the norms of American society, as well as expectations that they (Americans) have. I learned what is acceptable and what is not, but I still stayed true to my culture.* Another participant described how interacting with American friends helped in learning about the U.S. mainstream culture: *It definitely helps, friends are the best way to learn about a culture. When you hang out with them you learn the norms and what will help you 'fit in' or be accepted.* One participant wrote about how interacting with American friends built a desire to pursue the same opportunities: *My friends' parents were so proud to be American. All the opportunities my friends had, I wanted too.*

The survey responses make it clear that participants feel that Mexican friends and Anglo friends help adjust in American society; additionally, participants explained how Mexican-origin friends give a sense of belonging or being accepted and American friends help in learning the new culture; for instance understanding the norms and traditions.

Most of the participants agreed on the importance of both Mexican-origin friends and American friends. In a question that asked if participants if having Mexican-origin friends instead of having American friends is better

to help with adjustment for a newly arrived immigrant, eighteen out of twenty participants believed that it is important to have friends on both cultural groups in order to adjust. A participant expressed the importance of both friendship, and how they helped with adjustment:

Mexican friends will make you feel more at home and you will be able to identify with them, but the Anglo friends will be able to help you adjust to the new culture. It is easier to learn about a culture if one has friends within that culture.

A participant explained why both types of friendships are important:

Both are highly important. From a Mexican friend you can share experiences and they can give you advice on how to deal with situations that they've been in personally. An Anglo friend can teach you so much, and educate you on different things.

Similarly, another participant explained the belief that both Mexican and American friendships helped in understanding American culture:

I believe both are important to have. Mexican friends give you the support because they understand your culture. Anglo friends get you to understand the new life you are about to begin, they help you understand the American culture.

Establishing friendships in both cultural groups advanced the adjustment process, it gave the individual the ability to quickly learn about the new culture, but at the same time stay active in the culture of origin. As expected, participants believed that having a mix of Mexican friends and American friends was beneficial to the adjustment process. According to the responses, it is better to understand both cultures, instead of participating only in one culture.

### **Advice to Facilitate Adjustment**

Participants were asked to give advice for Mexican-origin individuals who were adjusting in American society. More than half of the participants (fourteen out of twenty) listed that learning English is vital for adjustment. In addition, some participants expressed that getting involved in the community, pursuing an education, becoming a member of a club or organization, building relationships and keeping an open mind for new experiences helps individuals who go through the adjustment process. One participant advised: *[Learning] English is the most important thing to do. After that just be open to new experiences and be friendly with people.* Another stated: *I would advise to them to be successful and accommodate to this country. Learning English is a must. Also building relationships with those from the U.S. since those will be people who one will be socializing with.* A third participant discussed the importance of bicultural friendships: *Building American friendships or people who have both cultures, and they could help you learn English which will really help accommodate in American society.* Lastly, a participant advised on the importance of learning the new culture, but maintaining the culture of origin: *Learn about this new culture, but at the same time keep your own culture.*

### **Discussion**

This study examined detailed survey responses of the cultural adjustment and perceptions of twenty Mexican-origin college students. Findings reveal insights into the facets of adjustment that may promote social and academic success in American society. Drawing from the range of responses to the survey, bicultural adjustment was experienced by each of the participants and they expressed that integrating both cultures is a critical component of successful adjustment to life in the U.S. In addition, respondents reported that friends (both Mexican-origin and mainstream American), teachers,

parents, counselors, mentors, tutors, and educational institutions were important influences that helped facilitate their bicultural adjustment.

Though responses varied across all items of the survey, taken together the results confirm the value of bicultural adjustment. Interestingly, no patterns emerged within the sample related to differences in bicultural experiences or perceptions by country of origin, ethnic categorization, language preference, other associated characteristics or factors. The absence of these types of patterns highlights both the appropriateness of the bicultural adjustment model in terms of applicability to a range of individuals from various backgrounds, but also to the nuance of the process that cannot be easily measured by one or two individual variables or indices. Echoing Cabassa (2003) and Alegria (2009), qualitative data is an important complement to larger quantitative studies exploring bicultural adjustment.

The in-depth survey approach gave participants the opportunity to freely express themselves in writing on many topics, which thus provided rich information. The study design is not without its limitations, however. Due to the focus on learning from Mexican-origin students who had achieved the success of college enrollment, other individuals were excluded from the sample. It is likely that a sample of Mexican-origin adolescents deemed to be successful based on some other indicator besides college enrollment would have yielded important and distinct findings from the study sample; this is an important direction for future research. In addition, many of the participants spoke Spanish fluently, however, the survey was only written in English. Therefore, it is possible that responses may have varied for some participants had they been given the opportunity to respond in Spanish. Lastly, the recruitment of the participants was not random. The participants were recruited via a cultural center that supports Latino students at the university where the study was conducted; thus, there was no possibility of recruiting more disenfranchised students who were not formally connected with the Latino student population and may have had distinct adjustment experiences.

Overall, this qualitative study confirms the value of bicultural adjustment that has been examined in large-scale quantitative studies (Birman, 1998; Iturbide et al., 2009; Schwartz et al., 2013; Scwartz et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2009). In addition, the study highlights in more depth some of the features of biculturalism that facilitate adjustment from the perspective of young adults who have gone through it. The findings regarding cultural pride, bicultural identity building factors, and advice for newly arrived immigrants demonstrate strategies and opportunities to promote social and academic success for newcomers. Alegria (2009) emphasizes the importance of learning about how the acculturation process happens for different groups and in different contexts; the participants' responses regarding what advanced or influenced their adjustment process can help assist others in creating bicultural identities to adjust in American society. Educational institutions can better serve the needs of these students by having knowledge that English-language learning, friends, teachers, parents, counselors, mentors, tutors, school programs, and bilingual schools can help Mexican-origin students adjust in school and in American society. From the responses of the participants it appears that the combinations of family support, Mexican friendships, American friendships, and bicultural friendships comprise strong social networks in American society that help Mexican-origin students adjust into American society.

Finally, the advice given by the participants about how to best adjust in American society communicated the value participants placed on being bilingual and achieving a balance between Mexican and American identities. This information contributes to the understanding of the adjustment process, and can also be used by community and educational institutions to help alleviate some of the stress and depression often experienced by Mexican immigrants when migrating and adjusting in American society. For instance, organizations could take such actions such as hiring more bilingual teachers and tutors, creating more bilingual programs, and engaging passionate bicultural mentors. This study can also serve as a guide of sorts for other

ethnic minority adolescents as to what helped others to become socially and academically successful in American society.

Future research on the adjustment process of Mexican-origin adolescents should compare the experiences of first-generation Mexican adolescents (born in Mexico) to those of second and later generation adolescents to see if there are significant differences. This study examined both groups together and did not have sufficient sample size to explore the differences between the two. Moreover, future research can concentrate on the difference the immigrations status of an individual makes in the adjustment process. Due to their enrollment in an American university and the fact that all participants' parents live in the U.S., the foreign-born participants in the study sample are likely to be legal immigrants; however, it would be important to investigate how an individual's immigration status might facilitate or inhibit the adjustment process. In addition, future research should explore the experiences and perspectives of other ethnic minority groups. Investigation of the adjustment of different origin groups would further advance the understanding of the value of biculturalism and how the adjustment process may vary by ethnic origin.

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