

# The Role of Ethnic Loyalty Among Mexican Immigrant Women

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The purpose of this study was to examine the role of Ethnic Loyalty in a sample of 140 Mexican women who immigrated to the United States at age 14 or older and who have lived in this country for an average of 7.5 years. Using the median of the ethnic loyalty scale as the cut-off point respondents were divided into two groups: High Loyalty and Low Loyalty. Women who remained highly loyal to Mexican culture (High Loyalty) had significantly lower levels of self-esteem and satisfaction and higher levels of acculturative stress than their counterparts who scored lower on the loyalty scale (Low Loyalty). Furthermore, most of the women in the High Loyalty group had plans of returning to Mexico and planned on obtaining only legal residency status rather than U.S. citizenship. Findings of the study suggest that because of the lack of appropriate coping skills to deal with their new environment, immigrant women from Mexico who remain strongly attached to their traditional Mexican culture (High Loyalty) are at higher risk of manifesting psychological conflicts than those women who are more flexible in their cultural orientation as shown by their lower ethnic loyalty scores.

The process of acculturation to the host country and subsequent loss of values, norms, and traditions of the culture of origin has long been an issue of interest among social and behavioral scientists. Many theories have been advanced that try to explain the impact of acculturation on the individual behavior of ethnic mi-

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nority group members, particularly first generation immigrants (Berry, 1980; Olmedo & Padilla, 1978).

For instance, Padilla (1980) proposed a multidimensional model of acculturation with Mexican Americans involving two essential elements: Cultural Awareness and Ethnic Loyalty. Based on the empirical testing of this acculturation model, Padilla concluded that Cultural Awareness is the more general component of acculturation and refers to the individual's language preference and use; knowledge of cultural heritage and ethnic identification. On the other hand, Ethnic Loyalty is the more tenuous component of acculturation and makes reference to the individual's preference of one cultural orientation over the other. Ethnic Loyalty also includes cultural pride and affiliation, perceived discrimination, and some aspects of social behavior orientation.

Findings from empirical studies on acculturation with Mexican Americans and other Hispanic groups have revealed that language (familiarity; usage; preference) is perhaps the single most important indicator of level of acculturation, especially among immigrants (Cuellar, Harris & Jasso, 1980; Marin, Sabogal, VanOss-Marin, Otero-Sabogal & Perez-Stable, 1987). In other words, among immigrants to the United States from Spanish-speaking countries, if their primary and preferred language is Spanish, it is very likely that their acculturation level is low.

Not knowing the language of the host country places serious limitations on the immigrants' integration to, and participation in, mainstream activities. Moreover, people who migrate face an environment in which not only language, but many of the habits, values, and socialization practices acquired in the country of origin no longer apply. It has been further indicated that the greater the cultural and behavioral differences between the immigrant's native cultural system and that of the new cultural environment, the greater the acculturative stress experienced by the individual (Berry & Annis, 1974).

Recent findings from studies conducted with immigrants to the United States have suggested that age at which immigration takes place is an important variable related to the experience of acculturative stress. Padilla and his colleagues (Padilla, Alvarez, & Lindholm, 1986; Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987) found that individuals who immigrated to the U.S. after adolescence (ages 12-14) experience greater levels of acculturative stress and lower self-esteem than those who migrate at a younger age.

Overall, the research literature on migration and mental health suggests that immigration is a stressful situation for the individual.

The combination of self-imposed pressure to succeed and perceived discrimination due in part to the lack of English communication and other skills, in addition to having left behind family and friends provide a high risk situation for the development of psychosocial conflicts such as depression among immigrants. However, contrary to the often negative attitude of the receiving group, immigrants who decide to settle in a new country seem to be motivated to, at least partially, adapt to a different socio-cultural environment. For instance, Buriel (1984) states in a theory of achievement and adjustment that "immigration from Mexico is motivated out of a desire for change and opportunity, which ultimately results in the northward migration of some of Mexico's most productive and ambitious individuals" (p. 127). He further indicates that after immigration those individuals who maintain their traditional Mexican culture and identity have a more positive self-image and feel more positive about their ethnic group than their counterparts who attempt to shed their traditional Mexican culture. Paradoxically, integration with traditional culture seems to allow Mexican immigrants to adapt more easily and to succeed in the Anglo American culture.

The research literature on acculturation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans is quite extensive, however, most of the studies address only one of the two acculturation elements identified by Padilla (1980), Cultural Awareness. The other element, Ethnic Loyalty has not been systematically studied as of yet, perhaps because researchers have concentrated on cultural change rather than cultural maintenance which is related to ethnic loyalty. However, the study of ethnic loyalty, especially among unacculturated immigrants is a pressing need.

Ethnic loyalty is an important variable to study and understand particularly among adult recent immigrants from Mexico who were socialized in their own country in the context of their original culture, and who, already exhibit high levels of cultural awareness. Because these individuals immigrate as adults, it is likely that they are knowledgeable of cultural material and that they have strong ties to their country of origin. The attachment or loyalty to the Mexican culture may influence the way in which Mexican immigrants perceive their own internal resources, adapt to their new environment, and make plans for the future.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the role of ethnic loyalty in a group of unacculturated adult Mexican immigrant women. The role of ethnic loyalty was examined as it relates to: (a) internal resources such as self-esteem and satisfac-

tion; (b) adaptation to the host culture as measured by acculturative stress and depressive symptomatology; and (c) plans to either stay in the United States or return to Mexico.

## METHODS

### Respondents

Respondents for this study were 140 women who had immigrated from Mexico into the United States at age 14 or older. The group's mean age at migration was 18.3 years, while the current mean age of the group was 25.7 years.

Participants in the study had an average length of stay in this country of 7.5 years. Although all respondents' primary and preferred language was Spanish, most women (80.3%) reported that they spoke at least some English, the rest (20.0%) were Spanish monolingual. The level of education ranged from no schooling at all to 20 years with a group mean of 9.4 years of education.

One half of the respondents worked outside their home and the other half were housewives. All women were married for the first time in Los Angeles County during 1984-1985 to Hispanic husbands.

### Sampling

Subjects for the study were obtained from the 1984 and 1985 marriage license files of the County of Los Angeles. This sampling frame was selected because of its many advantages for screening potential research subjects using the demographic information contained in the marriage records (e.g., place of birth and surname of potential subject, both parents, and spouse; birthdates; and current addresses).

The sampling involved three stages. During the first stage, potential women for the study were identified by their Spanish surname and their birth place (Mexico). The second stage involved the selection of only those women whose mother and father had Spanish surnames and were born in Mexico. The third and final stage was conducted during a brief telephone interview. At that time only those women who migrated to the United States at age 14 or older were invited to participate in the study.

### Instruments

A telephone survey instrument was specially designed for data collection and consisted of previously used as well as newly de-

veloped measures. The variables assessed with the instrument were loyalty toward Mexican culture, self-esteem, social support, coping strategies, acculturative stress, depressive symptomatology, general satisfaction, plans for the future, and general demographic information. The data was originally collected for a lengthy, complex study (Salgado de Snyder, 1986). For the purpose of this report, however, only portions of selected data on ethnic loyalty and related variables will be presented.

Ethnic loyalty was conceptualized as the component of acculturation that reflects the individual's preference of one cultural orientation over the other (Padilla, 1980; Keefe & Padilla, 1987). More specifically, ethnic loyalty includes the perception of discrimination, cultural pride, and aspects of social behavior orientation. The ethnic loyalty scale for this study consisted of 12 items all of which tapped ethnic loyalty toward the Mexican culture. The items of the scale were derived or modified from those used by Padilla (1980). Items inquired about the ethnicity of the subjects' social network, pride in their national origin and other issues tapping preference of one culture over the other in situations such as language used, socialization of offspring, and culture-related entertainment. All items were answered in a close-ended format. The scores ranged from 0 to 12 indicating low and high loyalty toward the Mexican culture respectively. The internal consistency of the scale resulted in Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .70.

Acculturative stress was conceptualized as a set of potentially stressful situations that immigrants face in an unfamiliar culture and environment. The stress scale was composed of 12 items derived from the preliminary 172 items of the Latin American Stress Inventory (LAS-I) developed by the research group of the UCLA Spanish Speaking Mental Health Research Center (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1987). The items assessed stresses in the familial, marital, social, financial, and environmental domains. Each item asked whether the respondent had or had not experienced the potential stressful situation in the last three months. Respondents reported on a four-point Likert type stress appraisal scale the degree of stress associated with each situation from *not stressful at all* (0) to *very stressful* (3). A check for internal consistency of this scale resulted in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .65.

Depressive symptomatology was measured using the H-HANES Spanish translation of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977). The CES-D is a 20-item scale widely used in research for the assessment of de-

pressive symptoms and generalized distress. Items of the CES-D are answered in a five-point format that makes reference to the number of days of the prior week during which the respondent felt as indicated in the item. The possible range of the CES-D scale is 0 to 20. Scores of 16 or higher are indicative of high risk for the development of psychopathology. Several studies have reported that the CES-D has high internal consistency and a similar factor structure and patterns of construct validity among whites, blacks, Mexican Americans, and Mexicans (Roberts, 1980; Masten, Caldwell-Colbert, Alcalá & Mijares, 1986). The CES-D scale Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this sample was .87.

Self-esteem refers to the positiveness of the attitudes toward oneself. A Spanish translation of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used in the present study to assess the respondents' level of self-esteem. The Rosenberg inventory consists of ten items that are answered on a five-point Likert-type format from *strongly agree* (4) to *strongly disagree* (0). The possible scores of the scale ranged from 0 to 40. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the translated version of the scale was .68.

Five items were developed to assess the respondents' overall satisfaction with their current life in the United States. The items were answered in a five-point Likert type format indicating how satisfied from *not at all* (0) to (4) *very satisfied* with respect to their marriage, family life, friends, opportunities to improve and decision to migrate.

### Procedure

The procedure for locating potential respondents involved the mailing of four letters per subject (two mailings of two letters each). The first mailing consisted of a letter sent to the wife and the husband's residence as recorded in the marriage license. The letter briefly described the study and asked the receiver to call collect to provide information on the whereabouts of the potential respondent. The letter also indicated that \$5.00 was to be paid for participation in the study. The second mailing took place approximately three weeks after the first. Again, letters were sent to both wife and husband. The second letter contained the same information and emphasized the importance of subject participation.

When respondents made the requested telephone contact, all calls were answered by a bilingual female who, after explaining the study in detail, invited only those women who met the last

criteria for inclusion in the study (immigrated after age 14) to participate. The telephone survey was administered immediately or an appointment was set for another time at the caller's convenience. There were no refusals to participate in the study once the initial telephone contact was made. All interviews were conducted in Spanish.

It is important to note that the sample of the present study is not representative of the entire spectrum of Mexican immigrant women in the United States. Therefore, the results of the present study must be interpreted with caution.

## RESULTS

First, ethnic loyalty scores were computed for the entire sample of respondents. The scores ranged between 1.66 and 12.00 with a group mean score of 9.30. Next, using the median value (9.7) of the loyalty scale, the respondents were divided into two groups: High Loyalty and Low Loyalty.

Women scoring above the median value of the loyalty scale formed the High Loyalty group ( $n=70$ ). These were women who remained highly loyal to Mexican culture. Conversely, the respondents with loyalty scores below the median value were grouped into the Low Loyalty category ( $n=70$ ), indicating that this group did not have a strong attachment to their culture of origin. Thus, the results of the study will be reported comparing the respondents who were highly loyal to their traditional Mexican culture versus those who maintain a lower level of ethnic loyalty.

Table 1 provides a profile of the respondents with general information comparing low versus high loyalty groups. As can be observed, the two groups were very similar in their demographic characteristics. The only difference found between the two groups was years of education. Women in the Low Loyalty group had significantly more education than their cohort group.

As for internal resources, important differences were found between the two groups in levels of self-esteem and satisfaction. Significantly lower levels of self-esteem ( $\bar{x}=29.2$  vs.  $\bar{x}=31.0$ ;  $t=1.9$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and satisfaction ( $\bar{x}=16.6$  vs.  $\bar{x}=18.4$ ;  $t=3.44$ ;  $p<.01$ ) were observed among the high loyalty group when compared with the low loyalty group.

Important differences were also observed between the two groups of women in their levels of acculturative stress. Women grouped in the Low Loyalty category scored significantly lower

Table 1  
**Characteristics of Mexican Immigrant Women with High and Low Ethnic Loyalty**

	LOW (n=70) Mean	HIGH (n=70) Mean
<i>Demographics</i>		
Current age	25.2	26.3
Age at migration	17.8	19.0
Number of siblings	8.0	7.8
Years of education	10.3	8.6 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Internal Resources</i>		
Self-Esteem	31.0	29.2 <sup>b</sup>
Satisfaction	18.4	16.6 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Adaptation</i>		
Acculturative Stress	10.9	12.9 <sup>a</sup>
Depressive Symptoms	14.1	14.9
<i>Plans for the future (%)</i>		
Remain in the U.S.	72.9%	41.4% <sup>c</sup>
Obtain U.S. Citizenship	65.7%	44.3% <sup>c</sup>

T-tests: <sup>a</sup> =  $p < .05$ ; <sup>b</sup> =  $p < .01$

Chi-square: <sup>c</sup> =  $p < .001$

than their counterparts in acculturative stress ( $\bar{x} = 10.8$  vs.  $\bar{x} = 12.9$ ;  $t = 2.1$ ;  $p < .05$ ). No differences in levels of depressive symptomatology as measured by the CES-D were observed between the two groups of women.

Consistent with their ethnic loyalty scores, a significantly larger proportion of women in the low loyalty group indicated a preference for staying in the United States (72.9%) over returning to Mexico (27.1%). The opposite was observed among the respondents who were highly loyal, most of whom expressed a preference to return to Mexico (58.6%) over staying indefinitely in the United States (41.4%) ( $\chi^2 = 12.86$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

Another variable assessed was the respondents' preference for obtaining either U.S. citizenship or legal permanent residency status. Results indicated that a larger number of women in the low loyalty group expressed that, if given a choice, they would prefer having U.S. citizenship (65.7%) rather than just permanent residency in the United States (34.3%). Conversely, women who remain loyal to Mexican culture (High Loyalty Group) expressed



a preference for obtaining only legal permanent residency (55.7%) over citizenship status (44.3%) ( $\bar{\chi} = 5.65$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

The characteristics in terms of personal resources, and cultural adaptation of women who had plans to either stay indefinitely in the United States or to return to Mexico were also examined. Fifty-seven percent of all respondents indicated that they had plans of staying in the United States permanently, while 43% had plans of returning to Mexico.

T-test analyses revealed significant differences between these two groups of women. Respondents who planned to remain in the United States had significantly higher levels of satisfaction ( $\bar{\chi} = 18.0$  vs.  $\bar{\chi} = 16.6$ ;  $t = 2.8$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and self-esteem ( $\bar{\chi} = 31.0$  vs.  $\bar{\chi} = 29.0$ ;  $t = 2.0$ ;  $p < .05$ ) but lower levels of ethnic loyalty ( $\bar{\chi} = 8.9$  vs.  $\bar{\chi} = 10.0$ ;  $t = -3.4$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and acculturative stress ( $\bar{\chi} = 10.7$  vs.  $\bar{\chi} = 13.2$ ;  $t = -2.5$ ;  $p < .01$ ) than the group of women who had plans to return to Mexico. CES-D scores did not differ significantly between the two groups.

## DISCUSSION

Findings of the present study offer important insights into the dynamics of ethnic loyalty as they relate to the process of acculturation among a group of women who were born and raised in Mexico through early adolescence (14 years of age). Results of the study indicate that in spite of the fact that respondents had lived in the United States for an average of 7.5 years, this group of immigrant women overall maintains a strong loyalty toward the Mexican culture. Their high scores in the Ethnic Loyalty scale suggest that socialization in the culture of origin through at least adolescence is an important factor related to the maintenance of ethnic loyalty and ethnic identification.

In this study, respondents in the Low Loyalty group had immigrated to the United States at a younger age than their High Loyalty counterparts. Therefore, it may be that the older the individual is when he/she migrates, the more likely he/she is to hold a stronger ethnic loyalty.

Contrary to Buriel's (1984) conclusions that integration with traditional Mexican culture leads to easier adaptation to the host culture, findings of the present study indicate that such propositions do not hold at least for this sample of immigrant women. Respondents who exhibit high levels of loyalty to their traditional Mexican culture had higher acculturative stress, lower self-es-

teem, and lower satisfaction when compared with their Low Loyalty cohort. These characteristics place the women who remain highly loyal to their original culture at risk for the development of psychological conflicts.

Education and SES may explain at least partially what happens following immigration. For instance, immigrant women who maintain a low level of ethnic loyalty may be more prone to integrate to the host culture at a faster rate. They may further their education and as consequence improve their financial situation, therefore experiencing fewer psychosocial stressors. It is also possible that those women who acquire greater levels of education, move away from their original culture and relinquish their ethnic identity.

Another aspect related to adaptation to the host country is the subjects' attitudes toward remaining in the United States or returning to Mexico. Our findings suggest that those immigrant women who plan to return to Mexico have a harder time in adapting to the host society and are at higher risk for development of psychological conflicts than those women who plan to stay indefinitely in the United States. Results of the present study indicate that the immigrant women who had plans to return to Mexico have lower self-esteem, lower satisfaction, and higher acculturative stress, than women who planned to remain in the United States.

Overall, our findings suggest that among this sample of Mexican immigrant women, high ethnic loyalty and desire to return to Mexico are factors that possibly contribute to an immigrant woman's at-risk status for developing psychological difficulties. However, this relationship might not have been observed had these women been given the opportunity to develop proper skills to cope with acculturation related stresses. Since this study did not focus on coping strategies, further research is needed that examines the ways in which immigrant women cope with the psychosocial demands of acculturation and its relationship with the maintenance of loyalty toward their culture of origin.

#### RESUMEN

Se examinó el papel de la lealtad hacia la cultura de origen (Lealtad Etnica) en una muestra de 140 mujeres mexicanas, quienes inmigraron a los Estados Unidos a la edad de 14 años o más y quienes han vivido en ese país por aproximadamente 7.5

años. Utilizando la mediana de una escala de lealtad étnica como punto de corte, se dividió la muestra en dos grupos: Grupo de Lealtad Alta y Grupo de Lealtad Baja. Las mujeres en el grupo de Lealtad Alta hacia la cultura mexicana tenían niveles más bajos de autoestima y satisfacción y niveles más altos de estrés de aculturación que aquellas mujeres con niveles bajos de lealtad étnica. La mayoría de las mujeres en el grupo de Lealtad Alta tenían planes de regresar a México y de obtener solamente residencia legal en los Estados Unidos en vez de ciudadanía. Resultados de este estudio sugieren que posiblemente debido a la falta de respuestas de adaptación para enfrentar un ambiente nuevo, las mujeres mexicanas inmigrantes que mantienen fuertes lazos con su cultura tradicional (Lealtad Alta) corren un mayor riesgo de manifestar conflictos psicológicos que aquellas mujeres con una orientación cultural más flexible (Lealtad Baja).

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