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Adapting for Well-Being: Examining Acculturation Strategies and Mental Health among Latina Immigrants

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Abstract: This study investigates how assimilation and integration, two commonly studied acculturation forms, help immigrant Latinas cope with acculturative stress and related psychological distress. It employs the Ecological Framework for Understanding Immigration (EFUI), merging Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the Socioecological Model as a comprehensive approach. Through multigroup analysis, various factors significantly affect the psychological distress of immigrant Latinas, including financial constraints, contentment with migration decisions, age, and adherence to *familial* values. Acculturative stress relates to English proficiency, racial discrimination experiences, U.S. residency duration, and contentment with the migration choice. The moderating effects of assimilation and integration vary, influencing psychological distress and acculturative stress differently in each group. In conclusion, this study uncovers complex coping mechanisms used by immigrant Latina individuals facing acculturative stress and highlights the protective role of assimilation, the importance of *familismo*, the impact of financial constraints, and the significance of racial discrimination. This finding underscores the need for mental health interventions to respect and incorporate Latinx individuals' cultural values and beliefs, promoting positive mental health outcomes.

Keywords: immigrant Latinas; discrimination; contextualization; immigration challenges; acculturation stress; psychological distress; psychological wellbeing

1. Introduction

The United States has experienced an unprecedented surge in immigration, with more than 50 million foreign-born individuals now residing there, accounting for 13.6% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2023; Batalova and Fix 2023). However, this influx of immigrants, particularly Latina immigrants, face significant challenges, including unwelcoming immigration policies, racial and ethnocentric contexts, and barriers to accessing essential resources such as employment, healthcare, and housing. These challenges have far-reaching implications for the socioeconomic wellbeing of Latina immigrants, leading to disparities in income, employment, and poverty rates compared to their white counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). To address the vulnerabilities faced by Latina immigrants, it is crucial to understand the experiences and factors shaping their immigration journey.

Acculturation emerges as a central theme in comprehending the immigration experience of Latina immigrants and its impact on their psychological wellbeing. It encompasses acquiring a new language, adapting to cultural and social dynamics, and adjusting to new food consumption patterns (Berry 2005). Berry (1994) proposed four acculturation strategies—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—that result in distinct acculturation outcomes. Marginalization occurs when newcomers refuse to associate with either the host country's culture or that of their native country. Integration involves immigrants accepting select traits of both cultures depending on the situation. Assimilation, on the other hand, refers to foreign-born individuals adopting the traits of the dominant culture

preceding their native traits. Finally, separation occurs when immigrants predominantly adhere to their native cultural traits (Berry 1997). Regardless of the chosen strategy, the acculturation process involves acculturative stress, which refers to the stress experienced while reconciling the culture of the original country with the host culture (Berry 1997). Acculturative stress is influenced by contextual factors such as financial constraints, language barriers, discrimination, conflicts in cultural values, loss of social support networks, identity conflicts, personal stigma, and pressure to conform to the dominant culture (Caplan 2007).

While the impact of acculturative stress varies across different immigrant groups and is influenced by the chosen acculturation strategy, the body of research investigating the relationships between acculturation, acculturative stress, and psychological wellbeing within a contextual framework remains in the early stages (Bekteshi and van Hook 2015; Bekteshi et al. 2015; 2016; Bekteshi and Kang 2020). Existing studies have treated acculturation as a general process, with little attention given to specific strategies such as marginalization, assimilation, integration, or separation. This article seeks to address this gap by focusing on how assimilation and integration, two frequently examined acculturation approaches, can alleviate the adverse effects of acculturative stress and contextual factors on the psychological distress of immigrant Latinas. This study utilizes the Ecological Framework for Understanding Immigration (EFUI) throughout the article as a comprehensive approach, integrating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the socioecological model. This framework examines the immigration experience of Latina immigrants at various levels: individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystemic, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The three sections of this article include (a) a summary of the recent literature on the impact of acculturation on acculturative stress and psychological distress among immigrant Latinas, (b) an investigation of the coping mechanisms of assimilation and integration in addressing the detrimental aspects of acculturative stress and its effects on the psychological wellbeing of immigrant Latinas, and (c) a concluding discussion of the implications of these findings and the potential for developing culturally sensitive and enduring mental health interventions.

1.1. Ecological Framework for Understanding Immigration (EFUI)

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the EFUI model suggests that an individual's development is shaped by intricate relationships across various layers of their environment. The most intimate layer, the microsystem, encompasses relationships and interactions such as family, school, neighborhood, and peers. In immigration research, the influences of immediate family and social circles on an immigrant's experience and adaptation are often scrutinized and found to be essential. Family support can notably affect an immigrant's ability to adjust to a new environment (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). The mesosystem involves connections between various microsystems, such as the correlation between an immigrant's work environment and their home life or their school and community experiences. Moreover, the exosystem indirectly affects the individual through decisions made at an immigrant's workplace or alterations in local community policies (Birman 2006). At the outermost level, the macrosystem incorporates broader societal and cultural constructs such as social norms, customs, and public policies, which can significantly influence an immigrant's experience due to discrimination, language barriers, or socioeconomic inequalities (Yoshikawa 2011; Birman 2006).

The use of this theory has been pivotal in examining the multifaceted immigration experience. Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008), Yoshikawa (2011) and Birman and Trickett (2002) are among the scholars who have used mixed methods to explore how these systems shape immigrants' experiences and outcomes. Key aspects, including immigrant challenges, social integration, cultural identity negotiation, the role of support systems, discrimination, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and social networks, have been examined to shed light on the complexity of the immigration experience. However, for Latino immigrants, this theory has been applied primarily to the experiences of young immigrants (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2010; Rumbaut and Portes 2001; Gonzales et al. 2009). The EFUI and

Bronfenbrenner's theories have been used to analyze how complex environments, including culturally diverse households, bilingual education programs, and community attitudes, significantly influence immigrant children's psychological and academic outcomes (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Another study revealed that factors across multiple levels, such as individual characteristics, family influences, school experiences, and societal attitudes, impact Greek immigrant adolescents' psychological adjustment and academic performance (Motti-Stefanidi and Asendorpf 2012). *Cultural identity negotiation* is a process in which both young and older Latino individuals adapt to a new cultural context, with challenges related to maintaining their heritage while integrating into the host society. Insights from studies on cultural identity negotiation among youth Latinos can shed light on how older Latino people navigate their dual cultural identities, manage acculturation stress, and maintain a sense of belonging. Additionally, factors such as social integration, experiences of discrimination, support systems, and socioeconomic factors have similar implications for both young and older Latinos, and understanding these factors among young people can inform interventions aimed at promoting well-being among older Latinos. Nevertheless, additional research using the EFUI is needed to explore the specific influences that impact the immigration process among adult Latino immigrants.

While the EFUI can offer valuable insights into the complexity of immigrant experiences, one limitation is that the EFUI does not prioritize context in terms of importance, which can restrict its application in research utilizing advanced quantitative techniques such as structural equation modelling (SEM). To address these limitations, our study integrates the EFUI with relevant literature that explicitly specifies the direction and significance of contextual relationships, focusing on the most influential contexts and their impact on acculturative stress and psychological distress among Latina immigrants.

1.2. Literature Review: Acculturation and Psychological Wellbeing among Latina Immigrants

The process of acculturation, where individuals adopt the cultural norms of a new society, has been extensively studied in terms of acculturative stress. Extensive evidence supports a link between acculturation and acculturative stress (Berry et al. 1989; Nguyen and Benet-Martínez 2013; Schwartz et al. 2010). Research has shown that socioeconomic factors play a role in acculturative stress, with low income and poverty amplifying the stress experienced by immigrants (Caplan 2007). Discrimination based on ethnicity or immigrant status has also been identified as a significant source of acculturative stress (Berry et al. 1989). When family members have different levels of acculturation, cultural conflicts can ensue within the family, increasing the stress experienced by individuals (Caplan 2007). Navigating new social support can be challenging for immigrants, as they strive to establish social networks and access appropriate support services (Caplan 2007). The pressure to conform to the dominant culture to fit in and be accepted has contributed to internal conflict and increased acculturative stress (Berry et al. 1989). Furthermore, research has shown that the experience of acculturative stress varies among immigrant groups based on factors such as ethnic group, English proficiency, and cultural immersion (Schwartz et al. 2010). Different cultural backgrounds and English proficiency levels can influence the stress experienced during acculturation. Additionally, the extent to which individuals are immersed in a new culture can impact their levels of acculturative stress (Schwartz et al. 2010). In addition to acculturative stress, the relationship between acculturation and psychological wellbeing also forms an intricate nexus. Extensive relevant research (i.e., Araujo 2020; Winn 2020; Myers et al. 1996; Schwartz et al. 2010; Lawton et al. 2018) indicates that acculturation may expose individuals to unique stressors such as language barriers, employment difficulties, and cultural differences. These stressors can exacerbate psychological wellbeing issues such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among individuals with lower levels of acculturation who experience more severe psychological distress (Myers et al. 1996).

However, the relationship between acculturation and psychological wellbeing is complex and may differ based on the acculturation strategy employed. For instance,

enculturation, or integration, can protect against mental health problems (Araujo 2020; Winn 2020). Studies have shown a correlation between lower levels of acculturative stress and positive psychological outcomes and the implementation of supportive education policies, longer parental tenure in the host country, cultural engagement, and the preservation of cultural values (Kim-Martin 2021; Williams et al. 1997), supporting the positive power of enculturation on the wellbeing of Latino immigrants. Active participation in cultural traditions and community events is vital for fostering a sense of continuity and belonging, enhancing psychological wellbeing, and mitigating acculturative stress (Kim-Martin 2021; Schwartz et al. 2010). Furthermore, research has consistently indicated that individuals with lower levels of acculturation often experience more significant psychological distress due to numerous interconnected factors (Schwartz et al. 2010). Language barriers, common among less acculturated individuals, can induce feelings of isolation and pose challenges in securing employment, escalating stress levels. Additionally, cultural differences can be challenging, and adapting to these new norms and values can exacerbate psychological distress. Discrimination and prejudice in a new society may frequently lead to social isolation due to a limited support network in the new environment, further enhancing acculturative stress (Finch et al. 2000). Finally, less acculturated individuals often grapple with identity crises, caught between their original cultural identity and the new culture they are attempting to integrate into, which can contribute to additional psychological distress. In contrast, individuals with higher levels of acculturation are typically more proficient in the new language, have a firmer grasp of the new culture, possess broader social networks, and experience less identity conflict, factors that collectively contribute to lower levels of acculturative stress (Berry et al. 1987; Kim-Martin 2021; Williams et al. 1997).

Our study aims to build on existing research examining the coping mechanisms used by immigrant Latinas in response to acculturative stress and the implications for psychological wellbeing. We plan to consider both individual experiences and larger social and cultural contexts, such as language barriers, discrimination, financial constraints, and difficulties visiting families to return home. This approach will enhance our understanding of acculturation, informing mental health professionals as they devise interventions. The previous study by Bekteshi et al. (2015) provides crucial context for our research. The results identified several factors influencing psychological distress among immigrant Latinas, such as acculturative stress, age, adherence to traditional values of familismo, and financial constraints. Furthermore, various other factors impacted acculturative stress, including contentment with the decision to move to the U.S., familial–cultural conflict, racial discrimination, and years in the U.S. Additionally, the interaction between years in the U.S. and familismo influenced acculturative stress. Familismo's influence was strongest when women had been in the U.S. for less than five years and weakest when they had been in the U.S. for more than 20 years. These findings guided our research, as we explored the complex relationships among acculturation, acculturative stress, and psychological well-being (Bekteshi and van Hook 2015).

2. Methodology

This study is a secondary data analysis investigating the influence of acculturation strategies on the experience of acculturative stress among immigrant Latinas in the U.S. using data from the National Latino Asian American Survey (NLAAS) (Alegria et al. 2004). The NLAAS is a cross-sectional survey designed by the Center for Multicultural Mental Health Research as part of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health Collaborative Psychiatric Epidemiology Studies (CPES). It includes comprehensive information on health, mental health, and health insurance coverage across different age groups. The survey employs a stratified area probability sample design, which involves selecting people or items from each subgroup using probability sampling or simple random selection (Steffen et al. 2001). The NLAAS study obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval from the Cambridge Health Alliance, the University of Washington, and the University of Michigan. No additional IRB approval was needed; the data were obtained from a publicly available secondary source.

The present study is based on a subsample of the NLAAS. A total of 639 Latinas born in Mexico (N = 257), Cuba (N = 264), and Puerto Rico (N = 118) who participated in the study were included in the present analysis (Alegria et al. 2004) (Table 1). Since the NLAAS was collected in 2002–2003, we acknowledge the temporal limitations of our dataset and the potential implications for the generalizability of our findings to current conditions. However, this dataset provides a valuable snapshot of the experiences of Latina immigrants during a specific period in U.S. history. It is crucial to contextualize our study within this timeframe as Latina immigrants' acculturation experiences and demographic characteristics might have evolved over the years since. Despite these limitations, the insights from this analysis offer foundational knowledge that can inform further research on the ongoing and changing experiences of Latina immigrants in the U.S.

Table 1. Demographics of Latina immigrant women (N = 639).

Demographic	%
Marital status	
Married/Cohabiting	62.2
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	23.9
Never Married	13.9
Age at immigration	
Less than 12 years	24.7
13–17 years	12.7
18–34 years	33.7
35+	21.6
Education	
0–11 years	49.9
12 years	21.3
13–15 years	15.6
>16 years	12.8
Employment	
Fully employed	58.7
Not employed	41.3
Years in the U.S.	
Less than 5 years	7.0
5–10 years	13.3
11–20 years	21.6
20+ years	49.1
Visiting family abroad difficulties	
No relatives abroad	4.60
Not at all difficult	21.7
Not very difficult	10.7
Somewhat difficult	20.9
Very difficult	42.0

2.1. Analytical Methods

This study employs multigroup analysis to examine the moderating effect of two well-studied acculturation strategies (assimilation and integration) on the relationships between contextual factors, acculturative stress, and psychological distress. The study used the split median method to calculate the medians of integration and assimilation and transformed the variables into dichotomous variables. Cross-group equality constraints were imposed on path coefficients during the analysis. Both unconstrained and fully constrained models were estimated to assess variations across immigrant Latinas with high and low levels of

assimilation and integration. The fit of the constrained model was compared to that of the unconstrained model using the Satorra chi-square test, with a worse fit indicating differing model paths across groups. Based on the results, only the findings of the third model are reported, as the fit of the constrained model was worse than that of the unconstrained model in this case (Tables 2–4). Patients with more than 10% missing data were excluded from the analysis. The assumptions of multivariate normality were met, and the MLR estimator was used to estimate standard errors, accounting for multivariate nonnormality. The MLR standard errors were computed using a sandwich estimator, eliminating the need for boot-strap procedures. To ensure the robustness of the results, cross-validation was performed using a holdover cross-validation technique. This involved randomly selecting and retaining one-half of the sample for validation and conducting multiple-group path analysis to compare the two random halves. The Satorra Bentler scale chi-square difference was used to assess model fit, and the test results indicated successful cross-validation of the baseline models on the two random groups.

Table 2. Direct standardized parameter estimates of path models-contextual factors, acculturative stress and psychological distress moderated by assimilation and integration (N = 636).

Model 3	Assimilation *M(SD)*		Integration *M(SD)*	
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2
Psychological Distress				
Acculturative Stress	0.06(0.03) *	0.06(0.04)	0.08(0.05)	0.07(0.04)
Financial Constraints	0.19(0.04) **	0.22(0.05) **	0.18(0.04) **	0.22(0.05) **
Content with decision to move to U.S.	−0.09(0.05) *	−0.13(0.06) *	−0.09(0.05) *	−0.12(0.06) *
Age	0.17(0.04) **	0.06(0.07)	0.27(0.05) **	0.06(0.07)
Familismo	−0.17(0.04) **	−0.25(0.06) **	−0.17(0.04) **	−0.26(0.06) **
Acculturative Stress				
English skills	−0.16(0.03) **	−0.26(0.06) **	−0.15(0.04) **	−0.26(0.06) **
Racial Discrimination	0.42(0.05) **	0.27(0.06) **	0.43(0.05) **	0.25(0.06) **
Years in the U.S.	−0.20(0.03) **	−0.23(0.04) **	−0.19(0.04) *	0.23(0.05) **
Years U.S. *Familismo*	0.06(0.03) *	0.07(0.04) *	0.12(0.05) *	0.02(0.03)
Financial Constraints	0.05(0.03)	0.07(0.05)	0.04(0.03)	0.06(0.05)
Content with decision to move to U.S.	−0.08(0.03) *	−0.14(0.05) *	−0 08(0.03) *	−0.14(0.05) *
9–11 Impact	0.08(0.07) ns	0.11(0.05) *	0.09(0.07) ns	0.12(0.05) *

Note. *p* < 0.01 **, *p* < 0.05 *, ns: naturalization services

Model 1: Integration: χ^2 = 23.43, DF = 24, *p* = 0.50, CFI/TLI = 1.00/1.00, RMSEA = 0.00 (0.0; 0.05)

Model 2: Assimilation: χ^2 = 8.156, DF = 8, *p* = 0.42, CFI/TLI = 1.00/0.99, RMSEA = 0.00 (0.0; 0.04)

Table 3. Synopsis of goodness of fit statistics tests of invariance moderator: assimilation.

	χ^2	*df*	*p*	χ^2/df	*p*-Value	RMSEA	TLI CFI
Model 1							
Unconstrained Model	29.05	22	0.14			0.03(0.00;0.07)	0.97/0.95
Fully constrained Model	51.90	36	0.04	22.89/14	0.062	0.04(0.01;0.05)	0.94/0.93
Model 2							
Unconstrained Model	13.65	16	0.62			0.00(0.00–0.04)	1.00/1.02
Fully constrained Model	31.29	29	0.35	17.65/13	0.17	0.01(0.00–0.05)	0.99/0.99
Model 3							
Unconstrained Model	18.84	14	0.17			0.03(0.00/0.07)	0.99/0.95
Fully constrained Model	41.70	26	0.03	22.92/12	0.03	0.05(0.03/0.07)	0.92/0.90
Partially constrained	23.43	24	0.56	5.30/10	0.87	0.00(0.00/0.04)	1.00/1.02

Table 4. Synopsis of goodness of fit statistics for tests of invariance moderator: integration.

	χ^2	*df*	*p*	χ^2/df	*p*-Value	RMSEA	TLI CFI
Model 1							
Unconstrained Model	29.13	22	0.14			0.03(0.00;0.07)	0.97/0.95

Fully constrained Model	52.08	36	0.05	22.98/14	0.061	0.04(0.01;0.05)	0.94/0.92
Model 2							
Unconstrained Model	13.37	16	0.64			0.00(0.00–0.04)	1.00/1.02
Fully constrained Model	31.17	29	0.35	17.65/13	0.17	0.01(0.00–0.05)	0.99/0.99
Model 3							
Unconstrained Model	16.47	14	0.28			0.02(0.00/0.07)	0.99/0.98
Fully constrained Model	44.86	26	0.01	22.92/12	0.03	0.05(0.02/0.07)	0.91/0.90
Partially constrained	20.18	23	0.63	4.15/09	0.89	0.00(0.00/0.03)	1.00/1.02

2.2. Measures

Regarding the measurement of variables, acculturative stress was measured by participants' self-rated agreement with six statements, including feelings of guilt about leaving family or friends in their country of origin, limited contact with family and friends, difficulty interacting due to language barriers, being questioned about legal status, fear of deportation when accessing social or government agencies, and avoidance of health services due to concerns related to immigration and naturalization services (INS). The acculturative stress scores ranged from 0 to 9, with higher scores indicating higher acculturative stress levels. The items used for measuring acculturative stress were obtained from the Mexican American Prevalence and Service Survey, which measures psychosocial stress experiences in Latino populations. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.88) (Cervantes et al. 1991).

The perceived racial discrimination of adults older than 18 years was measured by questions such as (1) How often do people dislike you because of your race/ethnicity? (2) Have you seen your friends mistreated because of race/ethnicity? (3) How often do people treat you unfairly due to race/ethnicity? The items were taken from the Detroit Area Study (DAS) (Williams et al. 1997), and the scales have been used in mental health research (Finch et al. 2000). The study reverse-coded response categories such that higher scores reflected a greater frequency of perceived discrimination. The internal consistency of the scale was high (Cronbach's α = 0.88).

Psychological distress was assessed using Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale (K10), which consists of 10 items measuring symptoms of depression and anxiety. The scale has been validated in previous studies and has shown good performance. The items included statements such as feeling depressed, feeling hopeless, feeling restless or fidgety, and feeling tired for no good reason. Psychological distress scores ranged from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating higher levels of distress. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.85) (Furukawa et al. 2003).

The current study incorporated a scale, familismo, which captures opinions of shared familial and cultural values, a general orientation toward family, family cohesion, and the willingness of family members to spend time with each other. This scale has been used frequently by people of Latin origin (Felix-Ortiz et al. 1994) as an indicator of their adherence to the values of familismo. It is measured by asking adults to rate their level of agreement with statements such as (1) family members respect each other, (2) the family shares values, (3) things work well as a family, (4) the family trusts and confides with each other, and (5) the family members are loyal to each other. The scale's possible scores ranged from 10 to 40. All the items were reverse coded such that higher scores corresponded to higher family cohesion levels. The scale's internal consistency was high in the current study (Cronbach's α = 0.80). English skills were measured with a scale that included questions such as (1) How well do you speak English? (2) How well do you read English? (3) How well do you write in English? The responses ranged from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent). The internal consistency was very high for the English skills scale (Cronbach's α = 0.93). Language (English and Spanish) served as a proxy for assimilation and integration. Both the assimilation and integration scales demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.88). While assimilation comprised items measuring immigrant Latinas' use of English in different environments, integration encompassed variables intended to measure their use of Spanish and English

in the same environments. Although scholars advocate for a more comprehensive measure of assimilation and integration, language remains a significant tool through which a person acculturates, justifying this simplistic measure of assimilation (Alegria et al. 2004).

Financial constraints were measured with an ordinal variable represented by the question rate your difficulty in meeting the monthly financial obligations and answers ranging from (1) not at all difficult to (4) very difficult; employment, a dichotomous variable coded as (0) not employed, (1) fully employed. Age was a continuous variable, with respondents ranging from 18 to 97 years old. A dichotomous question represented contentment with the decision to move to the U.S.: Would you decide to move to the U.S? The responses were either (1) yes or (0) no. Years in the U.S. were ordinal, with responses ranging from less than five years to more than 20 years. Difficulty visiting family at home was an ordinal variable, with answer choices ranging from no relatives abroad to very difficult.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the Latina immigrant women, with a sample size of 639. For marital status, most women (62.2%) in the study were married or cohabiting. A smaller percentage (23.9%) were divorced, separated, or widowed, and an even smaller percentage (13.9%) had never been married. Regarding age at immigration, women tended to immigrate during young adulthood. A significant percentage (33.7%) of the respondents had immigrated between 18 and 34 years. Fewer individuals immigrated as minors, with 24.7% arriving at less than 12 years old and 12.7% between the ages of 13 and 17. Overall, 21.6% of the surveyed women were 35 years old or older. In terms of education, a majority of the women (49.9%) had 11 years of education or less. Those with 12 years of education represented 21.3% of the population. Individuals with higher education levels were less common, with 15.6% having 13–15 years and only 12.8% having more than 16 years. Regarding employment, more than half of the women (58.7%) were fully employed, while 41.3% were unemployed.

The table also provides data on the length of time these women lived in the U.S. Nearly half (49.1%) had resided in the U.S. for more than 20 years. A smaller percentage (21.6%) had lived in the U.S. for 11 to 20 years. Fewer women had lived in the U.S. for 5–10 years (13.3%) or less than five years (7.0%). Finally, a significant portion of the women (42.0%) reported experiencing great difficulty visiting family abroad, and 20.9% found it somewhat difficult. Only a small proportion had no relatives abroad (4.60%) or found it not at all difficult (21.7%) or not very difficult (10.7%) to visit family abroad.

3.2. Navigation Assimilation, Contextual Factors, and Psychological Distress

Table 2 and 3 compares associations between psychological distress, contextual factors, and acculturative stress between Latina immigrants with high levels of assimilation and those with low levels of assimilation. For Latina immigrants with low levels of assimilation, acculturative stress positively impacted psychological distress ($p = 0.04$; b = 0.07). Additionally, financial constraints ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.19), contentment with the decision to move to the U.S. ($p = 0.04$; b = −0.09), age ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.17), and *familyism* ($p = 0.01$; b = −0.17) influenced participants' psychological distress. However, for Latina immigrants with high levels of assimilation, acculturative stress and age no longer significantly impacted psychological distress. Instead, financial constraints ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.22), contentment with the decision to move to the U.S. ($p = 0.04$; b = −0.09), and adherence to familismo ($p = 0.01$; b = −0.17) contributed to participants' psychological distress. On the one hand, the results suggest that, regardless of their level of assimilation, all Latina immigrants who reported higher adherence to familismo values and greater contentment with their decision to move to the U.S. were likely to experience lower levels of psychological distress. Additionally, regardless of their level of assimilation, all Latina immigrants with greater financial constraints were likely to report increased psychological distress. However, there was a positive relationship between

acculturative stress and age and psychological distress only among Latina immigrants with low levels of assimilation. This means that only Latina immigrants report a low level of assimilation; as their levels of acculturative stress increase, the older they are, the greater their reported psychological distress.

Acculturative stress among Latina immigrants with low levels of assimilation was influenced by English language skills ($p = 0.03$; b = −0.16), racial discrimination ($p = 0.05$; b = 0.42), years in the U.S. (p = 0.03; b = −0.20), and contentment with the decision to move to the U.S. ($p = 0.03$; b = −0.8). Additionally, the number of years in the U.S. interacted with the family to influence acculturative stress ($p = 0.03$; b = 0.06). Similarly, for Latina immigrants with high levels of assimilation, English skills ($p = 0.00$; b = −0.26), racial discrimination ($p = 0.00$; b = 0.27), years in the U.S. ($p = 0.04$; b = −0.23), and contentment with the decision to move to the U.S. ($p = 0.04$ b = −0.14) impacted their acculturative stress. Years in the U.S. also interacted with Familismo for this group in influencing acculturative stress ($p = 0.04$; b = 0.07). The results indicate that for all Latina immigrants, regardless of their reported level of assimilation, the more racial discrimination they perceive, the stronger their acculturative stress. Furthermore, the more English skills they acquired, the more contentment they reported with the decision to move to the U.S., and the longer they lived in the U.S., the less acculturative stress they experienced. For all Latina immigrants, the years in the U.S. interacted with the familismo values to impact acculturative stress. As demonstrated in Figure 1, familismo has the strongest influence on acculturative stress for Latinas in the early stages of their stay (those younger than five years). As indicated by the shallowness and lowest values of the blue lines, the level of familismo is associated with a significant decrease in acculturative stress during this period. However, as the duration of stay in the U.S. increases, the influence of familismo on acculturative stress diminishes. This is evident from the flatter and lower purple line, which indicates a weaker impact of familismo on acculturative stress among immigrant Latinas who have resided in the country for more than 20 years and the less acculturative stress they experienced, particularly in the first five years in the U.S. (Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates the impact of family on acculturative stress among immigrant Latinas in the U.S. based on the duration of their stay. The blue lines represent immigrant Latinas who have lived in the U.S. for less than five years, while the purple line represents those who have been in the country for more than 20 years.

Power of Dual Identity: Integration, Contextual Factors, Acculturative Stress, and Psychological Distress

For Latina immigrants with low levels of integration, their psychological distress was influenced by financial constraints ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.18), contentment with the decision to move to the U.S. ($p = 0.04$; b = −0.09), age ($p = 0.05$; b = 0.27), and familismo ($p = 0.01$; b = −0.17). A similar pattern was observed among Latina immigrants with high levels of integration, except for age, which was not significantly related. Financial constraints ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.22), contentment with the decision to move to the U.S., and adherence to familismo ($p = 0.01$; b = −0.26) were related to acculturative stress for this group. Greater financial constraints were associated with increased psychological distress in both groups. At the same time, greater contentment with the decision to move to the U.S. and stronger adherence to familismo values were linked to lower levels of psychological distress. Acculturative stress did not significantly impact the psychological distress experienced by either group of Latina immigrants in this sample.
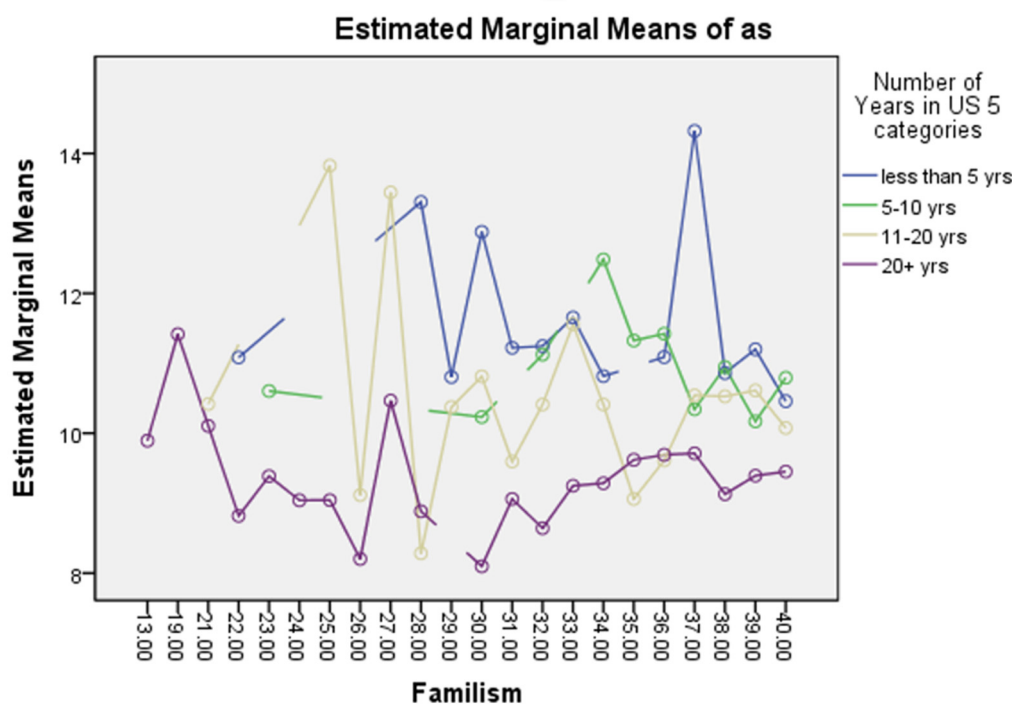
Figure 1. Interaction between Familismo and years in the U.S.

The acculturative stress of Latina immigrants with low levels of integration was influenced by English skills ($p = 0.01$; b = −0.15), racial discrimination ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.43), years in the U.S. ($p = 0.03$; b = −0.19), and contentment with the decision to move to the U.S. The acculturative stress of Latina immigrants with high levels of integration was also related to English skills ($p = 0.01$; b = −0.26), racial discrimination ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.25), and years in the U.S. ($p = 0.01$; b = 0.23). The results indicate that Latina immigrants with low and high levels of integration, stronger English skills, greater contentment with the decision to move to the U.S., and longer durations of residence in the U.S. were associated with less acculturative stress. Additionally, perceiving more racial discrimination was linked to greater acculturative stress. Familismo interacted with years in the U.S. in influencing the acculturative stress of Latina immigrants with high levels of integration only.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of acculturation strategies—specifically, assimilation and integration—on the relationships between contextual factors, acculturative stress, and psychological distress among immigrant Latinas. Drawing on the EFUI, we explored how various levels of the ecological system interacted to shape Latina immigrants' experiences and psychological wellbeing. Our findings suggest that highly assimilated immigrant Latinas do not exhibit a significant impact of acculturative stress on psychological distress. However, regardless of whether they reported high or low levels of integration, acculturative stress did not influence their psychological distress. These findings align with prior research emphasizing the protective aspects of assimilation, such as adaptive coping mechanisms and reduced stress levels, which lead to lower psychological distress among immigrant Latinas (Shah 2019). However, the findings from other studies present a more nuanced narrative linking higher assimilation levels with increased depressive symptoms (McCord et al. 2019). Such disparities underscore the complexity of the relationship between assimilation and psychological distress, emphasizing the need for further exploration and understanding of the underlying mechanisms involved. Our findings suggest that none of the acculturation strategies could alleviate the impact of financial difficulties on the psychological distress experienced by Latina immigrants. According to the socioecological perspective of the EFUI, which emphasizes the influence of broader

social and cultural contexts on immigrant experiences, financial constraints are consistently associated with increased psychological distress among this population (Cordero and Kurz 2006). Research indicates that limited financial resources and associated stress can exacerbate the challenges of acculturation and lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and overall distress (Kim-Martin 2021). Additionally, inadequate financial resources and a lack of available support can hinder access to essential services such as healthcare and education, exacerbating stress and feelings of helplessness (Kuo 2014).

The literature supports our findings. Latina immigrants often encounter discrimination based on skin color, language barriers, stereotypes surrounding their legal status, employment discrimination, and perceptions of being perpetual foreigners (Barnet et al. 1996). These experiences can inhibit their access to primary resources, housing, and employment, shaping their view of the host society and further delaying their integration. Encouraging assimilation by valuing familial ties and promoting satisfaction with the decision to immigrate can help reduce psychological distress. Moreover, supporting integration by fostering English proficiency, addressing acculturative stress, and combating racial discrimination can contribute to better overall wellbeing. It is crucial to recognize that individual preferences and circumstances may vary, so a flexible approach that considers individual needs and cultural values is recommended. While English language programs are vital for supporting the integration and wellbeing of Latina immigrants by enhancing communication skills and access to resources, it is essential to recognize their limitations in addressing structural discrimination. English proficiency does not automatically dismantle the systemic barriers and biases entrenched in institutions and societal norms. Structural discrimination involves more than just language barriers; it encompasses racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and legal status prejudices that can persist even when immigrants are fluent in English. Therefore, while advocating for increased access to English language programs, we must also push for comprehensive policy reforms and interventions that address more effective enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, promote diversity and inclusion in workplaces and educational institutions, and enhance community awareness and intercultural understanding. Moreover, support for maintaining and valuing immigrants' native languages and cultures is equally important. Bilingual programs and multicultural education can play a significant role in fostering an inclusive society that appreciates diversity. Such initiatives benefit immigrants by affirming their cultural identities and enriching the host society by promoting a more global and empathetic worldview.

4.1. Duration of Stay in the U.S. and Acculturative Stress

Our findings suggest that duration of stay in the U.S. plays a crucial role in acculturative stress. Conducting longitudinal studies that follow immigrant Latinas over an extended period could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of acculturation on mental health outcomes. These studies can track changes in acculturative stress levels, explore trajectories of adaptation, and examine how cultural values, such *as* familismo, evolve. Longitudinal research can offer a comprehensive understanding of dynamic acculturation processes and inform the development of targeted interventions and policies that consider the evolving needs of immigrant populations (Crockett et al. 2007).

One consistent protective factor against psychological distress and acculturative stress among immigrant Latinas is familismo, a Latino cultural value that emphasizes strong family ties, a sense of duty, and active participation in family gatherings (Sprague 2016). Our study's findings highlight the complex interplay between the protective role of families and the effects of assimilation on psychological distress among Latina immigrants. While familismo buffers against the challenges posed by acculturation and immigration, our observations also reveal that higher levels of assimilation, which might imply a shift away from traditional cultural values such as familismo, are correlated with lower distress levels. This might initially appear paradoxical; however, it can be reconciled by recognizing that assimilation does not necessitate the abandonment of one's cultural identity. Individuals often engage in selective integration, adopting beneficial aspects of the host culture while retaining

core cultural heritage elements, such as families. This bicultural approach can reduce the stress associated with cultural dissonance. Moreover, assimilation often brings improved language skills, educational opportunities, and resource access, further alleviating distress. The advantages of assimilation may complement, rather than diminish, the protective effects of familismo by offering a broader set of coping strategies and resources (Gil et al. 1996; Rivera et al. 2008). Additionally, the specific context, including supportive social networks and the level of discrimination encountered, plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of assimilated individuals. In environments where assimilation leads to greater inclusion, the potential negative impacts of distancing from traditional values may be mitigated.

An example of how familismo can lead to family–cultural conflicts, especially in the context of varying degrees of assimilation within a family, involves the scenario of a young immigrant woman who becomes more assimilated into American culture, embracing more individualistic values, which contrasts with her family's traditional collectivist values centered around familismo. This divergence can lead to tension within the family, as expectations about family roles and responsibilities clash. A young woman may seek more independence and autonomy, which her family perceives as rejecting familial support and unity, critical components of familismo. These conflicts underscore the dynamic relationship between familismo, assimilation, and psychological wellbeing, suggesting that the benefits of cultural adaptation are multifaceted and can coexist harmoniously within the immigrant experience (Gil et al. 1996; Rivera et al. 2008). Future research should explore how familismo influences wellbeing, focusing on specific aspects of familial relationships, such as intergenerational support, family conflict, and balancing familial responsibilities and individual autonomy.

4.2. Translating Research into Action for Mental Health Interventions and Policy Reform

The findings of this study have important implications for practice and policy. Targeted interventions are needed to address acculturative stress and promote psychological wellbeing among Latinx immigrants. Culturally sensitive counselling approaches, support groups, and community-based programs should be developed to provide resources and coping strategies for managing acculturative stress and enhancing psychological wellbeing outcomes (Gormley et al. 2005) given the different patterns of contextual factors that may be at play for different groups. Mental health professionals should be trained to understand and respect the cultural values and beliefs of Latinx individuals, integrating these factors into therapy to promote positive mental health outcomes. Additionally, policies that address discrimination and reduce systemic barriers are essential (Castillo et al. 2019). Mental health practitioners can advocate for policies promoting equity, inclusion, and social justice. By addressing discrimination and systemic barriers, these policies can help reduce acculturative stress and improve mental health outcomes for immigrant populations that are related to a lack of access to financial, educational, and other support. Furthermore, providing resources and support for language acquisition to facilitate acculturation and reduce language barriers is necessary (Shah 2019). Policies and practices should focus on offering language classes, language exchange programs, and bilingual support services to enhance language skills, promote acculturation, and reduce the stress associated with language barriers.

Our current study builds on the previous work of Bekteshi et al. (2015), which laid the foundation for investigating the contextual influence on acculturative stress and psychological distress. The primary differences between the two studies are rooted in the treatment of acculturation strategies, the influence of acculturative stress on the psychological wellbeing of Latina immigrants, the role of age, and the impact of familismo. Bekteshi et al. (2015) viewed the Latina immigrant population as a single, homogenous group and found that acculturative stress significantly influenced psychological distress. Age was identified as another significant factor influencing psychological distress in this population. However, in our subsequent study, we took a more nuanced approach by categorizing participants based on their levels of assimilation and integration. This distinction allowed us to explore how varying degrees of acculturation might affect psychological distress and acculturative

stress. Interestingly, acculturative stress did not significantly impact psychological distress among those with high levels of assimilation or among those with high or low levels of integration, suggesting a potential protective role of integration against the adverse effects of acculturative stress. Furthermore, we found that age was not a significant contributor to psychological distress among Latina immigrants with high levels of assimilation and integration, unlike in Bekteshi et al.'s (2015) study. This finding implies that as Latina immigrants become more assimilated or integrated, the influence of age on psychological distress diminishes. Both studies agreed on the significant contribution of financial constraints to psychological distress. They also found that individuals who were more content with their decision to immigrate or who reported higher adherence to *familyism* experienced less psychological distress, a trend observed across different levels of assimilation and integration. Regarding acculturative stress, both studies identified English proficiency, perceived racial discrimination, and duration of U.S. residence as significant influencers. Our study provides a more detailed understanding of these factors by considering the degree of assimilation and integration.

These differences between the two studies offer valuable directions for future research. For instance, the need for a multidimensional approach to acculturation is clear. Treating acculturation as a singular construct may overlook the complexities and nuances of the acculturation process, potentially missing critical influences on psychological distress and acculturative stress. The relationship between age and mental health in immigrant populations, as revealed by our study, is more complex than initially thought and requires further exploration. In addition, the consistency of economic factors, such as financial constraints, in contributing to psychological distress in both studies emphasizes the need for future research to further investigate the role of economic factors on immigrant mental health. These research implications not only enrich our understanding of the lived experiences of Latina immigrants but also guide future studies aiming to improve the mental health outcomes of Latina and other immigrant populations.

5. Limitations and Historical Context of the Data

This study, grounded in data from the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) of the early 2000s, provides critical insights into the demographic characteristics and acculturation processes of Latina immigrants during a distinct period in U.S. history. While the findings offer a valuable snapshot of these experiences, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations posed by the temporal nature of the data. The dated nature of the data necessitates a careful framing of our findings within the specific historical and social context of the early 2000s. The intervening years have witnessed significant shifts in immigration policy, societal attitudes toward immigrants, and the socioeconomic landscape of the U.S., each of which may have implications for acculturation processes and outcomes for Latina immigrants today. Recognizing these changes is crucial for interpreting the study's findings and their applicability to current conditions. Future research is encouraged to explore the dynamic nature of these processes, examining how the trends identified in this study have persisted or evolved considering recent developments. Such investigations would be invaluable in understanding the continuity and change in the acculturation experiences of Latina immigrants, providing insights into how shifts in the broader sociopolitical and economic context impact this population. While our study's reliance on historical data has several limitations, it also offers a foundation for ongoing research into the experiences of Latina immigrants in the U.S. By situating our findings within their historical context and highlighting their potential relevance to current and future conditions, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of acculturation and integration processes.

6. Conclusions

This study underscores the complex relationships among acculturation strategies, contextual factors, acculturative stress, and psychological distress among immigrant Latinas, building on and extending past research in several significant ways. First, our investigation

employs the EFUI, providing a comprehensive analysis that incorporates multiple levels of the ecological system. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how various layers of an immigrant's environment interact to shape their experiences and psychological well-being, offering a more holistic view than previous studies that may have focused on singular aspects of acculturation. Second, through our methodology, we differentiate between broader acculturation processes and specific instances of assimilation and integration, examining their distinct impacts on psychological well-being. This distinction is crucial because it allows us to analyze how different aspects of cultural adaptation influence mental health outcomes among Latina immigrants, providing a more granular understanding of the role of acculturation in mental health. Our study contributes to the field by highlighting the protective role of integration and the importance of familismo in mitigating psychological distress. These findings suggest that not all acculturation strategies have the same impact on mental health and that certain cultural values can serve as buffers against psychological distress. This insight is vital for developing culturally sensitive mental health interventions and policies that are more effectively tailored to the needs of immigrant populations.

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