



## Immigrant generation, selective acculturation, and alcohol use among Latina/o adolescents <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Do alcohol use and binge drinking among Latina/o adolescents increase in the second and third generation? This study explores generational differences in alcohol use behaviors for three Latina/o ethnic groups. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health on 1504 Latina/o adolescents in secondary school, we found that the factors associated with alcohol use behaviors differed across the Latina/o groups. For Mexican and Cuban adolescents, but not Puerto Ricans, immigrant generation was associated with alcohol use. For Mexican, but not Cuban adolescents, acculturation mediated the effect of immigrant generation on alcohol use behaviors. Although generally social capital and a co-ethnic presence were protective factors against alcohol use behaviors, we found that some forms of social capital were actually risk factors for Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Our results provide support for segmented-assimilation theory.

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### 1. Introduction

This research examines adolescent alcohol use behaviors among Latina/o ethnic groups guided by segmented-assimilation theory<sup>1</sup>. Although recent research suggests that some long-term health benefits may accumulate from alcohol use in moderation (Mukamal et al., 2003), for adolescents the physical, social and psychological risks associated with alcohol use make it a major social problem. During late adolescence and early adulthood, drinking is often associated with risky and illegal behaviors, increasing emotional distress, and other negative psychological outcomes that may impact later life stages (Chassin et al., 1999; Schulenberg and Maggs, 2002; Crosnoe et al., 2004). For recent immigrants or the children of immigrant parents, these risks may be even more costly as families, often on the financial and social margins, lack the resources to protect their children if they get into trouble (Brindis et al., 1995). Yet Schulenberg and Maggs (2002) argue that many teens view drinking as acceptable and even socially beneficial, providing evidence that “alcohol use and heavy drinking are culturally embedded in the experience

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<sup>1</sup> In previous work, many scholars have used the terms Latino/a and Hispanic interchangeably. The Add Health survey asked respondents to indicate if they are “of Hispanic or Latino origin”. In this paper, we use the term Latina/o, a convention increasingly adopted in most recent research.

of adolescence and the transition to young adulthood” in the United States (p. 54).<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with a growing body of research which has consistently illustrated an association between immigrant generation and health risk behaviors such as cigarette smoking (Brindis et al., 1995; Khoury et al., 1996), drug use (Velez and Ungemack, 1995; Vega and Gil 1999), as well as alcohol use (Welte and Barnes, 1995; Epstein et al., 1996; Gil et al., 2000; Stone and Meyler, 2007).

The identification of adolescent alcohol use as both a problem behavior and a rite of passage among US youth and the well documented relationship between immigrant generation and a host of health risk behaviors make it a particularly compelling phenomenon to explore within a segmented-assimilation framework, which predicts that the longer the contact of a group with the host culture, the more likely they are to adopt the normative behaviors of that culture unless the family and community facilitate a process of selective acculturation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Similar to Gibson (1988) concept of multilinear acculturation, selective acculturation is a process whereby immigrant groups acquire certain cultural practices from the dominant culture, while maintaining their own (or elements of their own) ethnic culture. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argued that this process of “selective acculturation” would help facilitate upward assimilation particularly for those in the second generation. We define assimilation as do Alba and Nee (2003) as a process whereby “ethnic origins become less and less relevant in relation to another ethnic group (typically, but not necessarily, the ethnic majority group), and individuals on both sides see themselves more and more alike” in such a way that cultural and social distinctions become less salient (p. 11)<sup>3</sup>.

While valuable, extant research has yet to fully specify the complex relationships among immigrant generation, selective acculturation, and alcohol use behaviors among Latina/o adolescents. Single community samples or studies of individual Latino ethnic groups have offered important information, as have studies that explore multiple Latina/o groups without consideration of national origin, but research on nationally representative samples that permit comparisons across generation by ethnic group are needed to determine whether prior findings can be generalized or are unique to certain communities or ethnic groups. Additionally, studies of acculturation and health behaviors that collapse multiple Latina/o ethnic groups into one group (Abraído-Lanza et al., 2005) ignore both the cultural differences among the groups and the differences in the reception that groups from different countries encounter in the United States. Portes and Rumbaut (1996, 2001) make a strong case that immigrants from different countries confront varying governmental and societal responses based on country of origin, settlement patterns and historical timing. They argue that these responses, in addition to differences in immigrant family and community resources, make possible different types of acculturation that may potentially facilitate or impede immigrant incorporation into the US culture and economy.<sup>4</sup>

Guided by a segmented-assimilation framework, this study addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring the associations among immigrant generation, selective acculturation, and alcohol use behaviors for a nationally representative sample of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican adolescents using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Udry, 2003). The Add Health data provide a number of advantages over prior data. First, these data allow for a comparison of the drinking behaviors of adolescents from three different Latina/o ethnic groups. Second, they include data on the human and social capital of these adolescents so that we can explore the notion that selective acculturation may be protective for alcohol use for some immigrants. And third, these data include an in-school survey which can be used to aggregate the characteristics of the populations of students in the schools where Latina/os attend and therefore take into account the co-ethnic context that adolescents encounter at school.

## 2. Racial and ethnic differences in adolescent alcohol use

Consistent with the literature on racial and ethnic differences in adult alcohol use, research on adolescent alcohol use has indicated that Latina/os have lower rates of alcohol and heavy drinking than whites but higher rates than blacks (Dawson, 1998; Khoury et al., 1996; Wallace et al., 1995; Warheit et al., 1996). However, extant research does not provide consistent findings regarding national origin differences in adolescent alcohol use patterns across Latina/o groups. For instance, in a nationally representative study of high school seniors, Wallace and Bachman (1991) found that Mexican adolescents were more likely to drink and engage in heavy drinking than Puerto Ricans regardless of gender. In contrast, more recent research has found few differences in adolescent alcohol use across Latino groups (Khoury et al., 1996; Nielsen and Ford, 2001).

Of the studies exploring the relationship between assimilation and alcohol use, most have measured assimilation only in terms of nativity. These studies found that second generation Latina/os reported higher levels of alcohol use than first generation Latina/os (Alva, 1995; Khoury et al., 1996). Likewise, Velez and Ungemack (1995) found that New York born Puerto Rican adolescents are at a greater risk for alcohol use than their Puerto Rican born peers in the US or Puerto Rico. Overall, the available research on adolescents suggests that nativity matters in understanding Latina/o adolescent alcohol use patterns.

<sup>2</sup> Recent research on adolescents in Mexico, northern border states shows increasing rates of alcohol use among both males and females (Floyd et al., 2005; McKinnon et al., 2004) and provides some evidence that Schulenberg and Maggs (2002) argument may also be applicable across the border. However, evidence comparing New York born Puerto Rican adolescents to their Puerto Rican born peers in the US or Puerto Rico found that the New York born adolescents were more at risk for alcohol use (Velez and Ungemack, 1995). We found no research documenting the extent of alcohol use among Cuban born adolescents in Cuba.

<sup>3</sup> There is an ongoing debate about the utility and appropriate use of concepts such as assimilation and acculturation in health research and more generally. Please see Escobar and Vega (2000), Hunt et al. (2004), or Alba and Nee (2003) for a careful consideration of some of the issues relevant to this debate and a discussion of the use of these concepts in social science research.

<sup>4</sup> See Gibson (1988) for a similar argument.

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