



Limited English proficiency and psychological distress among Latinos and Asian Americans

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ABSTRACT

English proficiency is increasingly recognized as an important factor that is related to the mental health of immigrants and ethnic minorities. However, few studies have examined how the association between English proficiency and mental health operates and whether the pattern of association is similar or different among various ethnic minority groups. This paper investigates how limited English proficiency directly and indirectly affects psychological distress through pathways of discrimination for both Latinos and Asian Americans in the United States. Findings suggest that, for Asian Americans, limited English proficiency has an independent relationship with psychological distress over and above demographic variables, socioeconomic and immigration-related factors and discrimination. For Latinos, however, socio-demographic variables and discrimination show a stronger association than limited English proficiency in affecting psychological distress. Different forms of discrimination – everyday discrimination and racial/ethnic discrimination – are equally important for both ethnic groups. Findings underscore the differential role of limited English proficiency for the mental health of Asian Americans and Latinos and suggest the distinctive racial experiences and backgrounds of these two ethnic groups.

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Introduction

The upsurge in immigrants in recent decades and the subsequent growth of the foreign-born population in the United States have led to a high proportion of people with a low level of English proficiency. Kim, Loi, et al. (2011), drawing on U.S. Census data, found that over 51% of the U.S. immigrant population reported speaking English less than “very well” and they were referred to as a population with limited English proficiency (LEP). LEP is particularly an issue for Latinos and Asian Americans because they constitute approximately 78% of the foreign-born population since 2000 (Camarota, 2007; Hall & Farkas, 2008).

English proficiency is a primary social status variable for immigrants and their children because it is closely associated to socioeconomic factors (i.e., earning and employment status), social interactions, and discrimination (Gee, Walsemann, & Takeuchi, 2010). As Jasso (2011, p.1328) remarked, “Perhaps no single characteristic is as emblematic of both the life chances of immigrants and their children and the reactions of natives as English fluency.”

Proficiency in the host country's language plays a significant role in the economic assimilation of immigrants and their children (Casey & Dustmann, 2008). There is empirical evidence suggesting a positive association between English skills and earnings for immigrants (i.e., Bleakley & Chin, 2004; Hall & Farkas, 2008). LEP or speaking English with an accent is usually associated with a foreigner stereotype and can trigger discrimination (i.e., Bleakley & Chin, 2004; Gee & Ponce, 2010).

LEP is increasingly recognized as one of the key correlates of health behaviors (Tang, Shimizu, & Chen, 2005), self-rated general health (Ding & Hargraves, 2009; Gee et al., 2010; Ponce, Hays, & Cunningham, 2006), physical health (Kim, Worley, et al., 2011), mental health (Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, & Li, 2011; Kim, Worley, et al., 2011; Ponce et al., 2006; Torres, 2010), health-related quality of life (Gee & Ponce, 2010; Mui, Kang, Kang, & Domanski, 2007) and health service access and utilization (Kim, Loi, et al., 2011; Kim, Worley, et al., 2011; Ponce et al., 2006; Shi, Lebrun, & Tsai, 2009) for American immigrants, Asian Americans in particular. These past associations with health outcomes are probably due to its links with both economic and social factors.

To date, however, only a limited number of studies (Ding & Hargraves, 2009; Kim, Wang, et al., 2011) examine how the association between English proficiency and mental health operates.

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Even fewer studies, if any, compare this association among different racial and ethnic minorities using representative samples. The current study elaborates and tests hypotheses regarding how LEP is directly and indirectly associated with psychological distress through pathways of discrimination. We compare the patterns of the association between Latinos and Asian Americans, the two large racial/ethnic minority groups that are most likely to face English language difficulties.

Theoretical background

The direct effect of LEP on psychological distress

As one of the first steps toward acculturation to the United States (Gordon, 1964) and an essential requirement for upward social mobility, English proficiency can be considered as an important social status variable that directly influences patterns of psychological distress. If immigrants are unable to comprehend or speak English, it can create a “cultural distance” (Berry, 1997). For instance, LEP can make it difficult for a person to communicate with others, develop social networks with English-speaking residents, and access useful information, which may seriously undermine life chances. All of these inconveniences and discomforts in the navigation of daily life may be stressful and eventually lead to negative emotions such as frustration, sadness, anxiety, and a sense of insecurity, which in turn, will directly boost levels of psychological distress. New immigrants who have lived in the country for a short duration and who have LEP could be especially at risk of experiencing this type of “acculturative stress” because they have not yet adapted to the dominant culture, which has negative psychological ramifications (Berry, 1997). In this sense, LEP itself is a social vulnerability and an acculturative stressor that increases levels of psychological distress through an independent effect.

Accordingly, the first aim of this study is to examine the direct effect of LEP by answering the following research question: Do Latinos or Asian Americans with LEP (i.e., individuals whose spoken English is other than excellent or good) tend to report poorer mental health indicated by higher levels of psychological distress? According to the existing theories and empirical evidence on social status, acculturation, and mental health, we expect to identify a positive association between LEP and psychological distress for both Latinos and Asian Americans.

The indirect effect of LEP on psychological distress

Levels of English proficiency may influence other factors to indirectly affect psychological distress. Individuals with LEP can become wary that they are being victimized or stigmatized as a result of their difficulties with language and communication or worry about interpersonal discomfort and embarrassment that could lead to social isolation, undermine self-worth, and eventually cause negative psychological consequences (Mui et al., 2007). Among various psycho-social factors, perceived discrimination may be an important mediating factor that links LEP and mental health, but it has not been closely examined by previous studies. Using the California Health Interview Survey, Gee and Ponce (2010) found that LEP and perceived discrimination are both independently associated with poorer quality of life. Although this study simultaneously examined LEP and discrimination, it did not directly test the mediating effect of discrimination. Kim, Wang, et al. (2011) conducted the very first study to examine the mechanisms linking LEP with mental health through discrimination. Using a sample of Chinese American adolescents, Kim et al. found that low levels of English proficiency in middle school were related to speaking English with an accent in high school, which in turn, contributed to

the perception of being stereotyped as a perpetual foreigner, discriminatory experiences, and depressive symptoms. However, one of the limitations of this study was the use of a regional sample composed exclusively of Chinese Americans.

How would LEP influence mental health through discrimination? LEP or speaking English with an accent may greatly hinder interpersonal communications and directly invoke racial stereotypes and biases that lead to discrimination (Kim, Wang, et al., 2011; Yoo, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2009). Self-reported experiences of discrimination have been found to be associated with poorer mental health for both Latinos (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Finch, Kolody, & Vega, 2000; Torres & Ong, 2010) and Asian Americans (Gee, Spencer, Chen, Yip, & Takeuchi, 2007; Hahm, Ozonoff, Gaumond, & Sue, 2010; Mossakowski, 2003; Yip, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2008). On the other hand, however, it is also possible that individuals with LEP are not sensitive toward discrimination because of the language barrier, and thus underreport discrimination. Finch et al. (2000) revealed that more highly acculturated Mexican immigrants (i.e. those with greater usage of English and longer durations of U.S. residence) are more likely to perceive discrimination compared to their less acculturated counterparts. Similarly, Perez, Fortuna, and Alegria (2008) found that American-born Latinos and Latinos arriving in the U.S. at younger ages are more likely to perceive discrimination than immigrants arriving at older ages.

Taken together, the second aim of this study is to explore the indirect effect of LEP on psychological distress by answering the following research question: Can the association between LEP and psychological distress be attributed to discrimination? We propose that LEP will be positively related to different forms of discrimination, which in turn, are positively associated with psychological distress (Fig. 1). However, we should recognize the aforementioned possible negative association between LEP and perceived discrimination. Individuals with LEP may underreport discrimination due to reasons such as residential isolation and lower levels of exposure and sensitivity.

When examining the effect of discrimination, we consider everyday discrimination (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997) and racial/ethnic discrimination, two distinct but embedded dimensions of stressful experiences. Essentially, everyday discrimination includes more of the generic, chronic and minor forms of unfair treatment that largely involve “character assaults” (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999), whereas racial/ethnic discrimination is an acute and major experience of unfair treatment that is specifically due to one’s race and ethnicity, and critical to one’s social mobility. As a chronic stressor, everyday discrimination is closely related to acute racial/ethnic discrimination. For instance, a person may become exposed to more episodes of chronic unfair

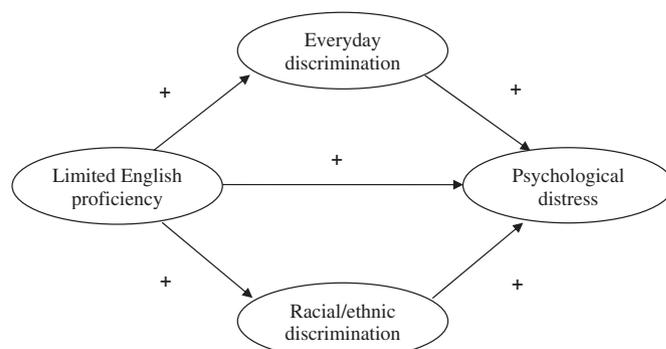


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of relationships among limited English proficiency, everyday discrimination, racial/ethnic discrimination, and psychological distress.

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