

# The Importance Of Addressing Acculturative Stress In Marital Therapy With Hispanic American Women

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THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING ACCULTURATIVE STRESS IN MARITAL  
THERAPY WITH HISPANIC AMERICAN WOMEN

by

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B.S. University of Georgia, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress among Hispanic American women and to explore the potential mediating roles of variables believed to be important to marital functioning among ethnic minorities and immigrants (e.g., acculturation, ethnic identity, social support, etc.). Based on data from 103 Hispanic American married women, pressure to acculturate toward the dominant culture of the U.S. was found to significantly correlate with the amount of distress the women reported in their marital relationships. Two variables were found to partially mediate the correlation. Perceived social support and recent stressful life events attenuated the effect acculturative stress had on marital distress. The importance for mental health professionals to address acculturative stress with Hispanic women or couples in marital therapy, and other clinical implications of the findings, are discussed.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, Hispanic Americans<sup>1</sup> have formed the largest ethnic minority group, as well as the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Many Hispanics living in the U.S. experience an array of challenges as a result of their ethnic minority status; for Hispanics born outside of the U.S., those challenges often are compounded by additional stressors related to their status as immigrants. Both Hispanic immigrants and U.S.-born Hispanics vary in the degree to which they acculturate toward the mainstream, American culture and experience stress related to the process and pressures to acculturate (Saldaña, 1994; Smart & Smart, 1995; Stephenson, 2000). The stress stemming from pressures to acculturate likely reverberates and adversely affects other domains of life for many Hispanics, including their marital relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress among Hispanic women living in the United States and to explore potential mediating roles of variables such as acculturation, social support, and other variables believed to be important in the study of marital functioning.

For many Hispanics—as with all ethnic groups—marriage is considered the foundation for establishing a family and for experiencing emotional intimacy and security (Falicov, 1982; 1992). Yet, the empirical literature indicates that marital relationships are a primary source of dissatisfaction for many people, including Hispanics, and that marital distress is one the most common reasons individuals seek therapy (Padilla & Borrero, 2006; Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006; Snyder, Heyman, & Haynes, 2005). Marital strife in conjugal relationships is

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Hispanic* is not preferred by all members of this ethnic group. However, to eliminate potential confusion by using other terms interchangeably (e.g., *Latino*, *Chicano*), *Hispanic* will be used throughout this article when referring to persons who trace their heritage to Latin American origins. The exception to this is when we refer to persons of a specific subgroup of Hispanics (e.g., *Mexican Americans*, *Puerto Ricans*).

implicated in domestic violence (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004), child behavioral problems (Davies, Myers, & Cummings, 1996), and divorces (Gottman, 1994). Moreover, the quality of marital relationships has been linked to both positive and negative physical and mental health outcomes (Barnett, Steptoe, & Gareis, 2005). The incidence of disease and mortality are lower for married individuals across a broad range of mental and physical conditions (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Depressive symptoms in one partner are associated with lower overall marital satisfaction in both partners (Gotlib & Whiffen, 1989), and conflict-laden relationships are associated with high depressive symptoms, high levels of perceived stress, and low levels of marital satisfaction (Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Dehle, Larson, & Landers, 2001).

Further, marital relationships may be even more distressful to women due to the multiple demands placed on them in the context of domestic responsibilities vis-à-vis their own financial and career aspirations and challenges (Prigerson, Maciejewski, & Rosenheck, 1999). The picture for Hispanic women may potentially be grimmer in light of possibly adhering to relatively more rigid gender-role expectations (Falicov, 2005; Garcia-Preto, 1998; Vazquez, 2005) and experiencing additional distress related to both their own and other family members' pressures to acculturate.

Although a large body of research exists examining marital satisfaction, relatively few studies have examined the relationships of Hispanic couples. Based on that literature, it generally has been found that Hispanic marital relationships tend to be more stressful on myriad dimensions compared to non-Hispanic White marital relationships (Negy & Snyder, 1997; Parke et al., 2004). It has been suggested that economic hardships and struggle with language and identity challenges place a disproportionate number of Hispanic Americans at risk for heightened levels of marital distress. In addition, Hispanic immigrants living in the U.S. and who are



separated from their extended family and friends are likely to experience even higher levels of stress across multiple life domains (Griffin & Villavicencio, 1985).

Acculturation is the process by which one acquires new values and behaviors consistent with a new culture in which they find themselves (Berry, 1980; 1996; Cortes, Rogler, & Malgady, 1994). The earlier notions of acculturation have changed from a bimodal model, in which one is either unacculturated or acculturated, to a multidimensional model, in which one may be considered bicultural or even multicultural (Stephenson, 2000). The multidimensional model recognizes that individuals may come into contact with multiple cultures and identify in various degrees with more than one culture. Individuals are faced with the dilemma of determining how much of the new culture to incorporate into their self-concepts and what aspects of their original culture to retain. In a number of studies with distinct subgroups of Hispanics living in the United States, higher levels of acculturation have been associated with problematic behaviors, such as increased drug usage, alcohol problems, depression, and an assortment of mental health problems (e.g., Balls-Organista, Organista, & Kurasaki, 2002; Caetano, Field, & Nelson, 2002; Caetano & Medina Mora, 1988; Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGrath, 2004; Markides, Ray, Stroup-Benham, & Trevino, 1990). In contrast, other studies have found acculturation toward the United States culture to be associated with positive behaviors, such as increased openness to seeking professional counseling (Miville & Constantine, 2006), a greater awareness and concern for safety precautions (Romano, Tippetts, Blackman, & Voas, 2005), higher parental involvement and increased academic success among children (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004), and less tolerance of domestic violence (Harris, Firestone, & Vega, 2005).

Acculturation may be a life long process, potentially impacting not only recent immigrants, but also subsequent generations (Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, & Garcia-Hernandez, 2002). The degree and quality of acculturation may vary across contexts, as places of employment, school, family, friends, and society tend to have distinct acculturative expectations. The continual shift between role-expectations may create a disorganized sense of self, as one's self concept is continually being reorganized in accordance with the level of acculturation. Further, acculturation may dominate cognitive processes and coping skills, leaving less emotional resources to deal with other life demands. Moreover, the pressures to acculturate likely are experienced differently across individuals and for some, may create an intra- and interpersonal stress syndrome referred to as acculturative stress (Rodriquez et al.). For Hispanic immigrants in the United States, acculturative stress may result from struggling to communicate with English-speakers, perceived cultural or value incompatibilities between mainstream United States culture and their culture of origin, and cultural self-consciousness. Acculturative stress affects individuals differently and has been found to correlate with psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse, and eating disorders (e.g., Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000; Hovey & Magana, 2002; Perez, Voelz, Pettit, & Joiner, 2002). Some research has found that Hispanics who have achieved a bicultural orientation have lower rates of psychopathology (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Padilla, 1995).

In the context of acculturation, often it is necessary to consider ethnic identity (Cuellar, Nyberg, Maldonado, & Roberts, 1997). Ethnic identity involves self-identification as a group member, attitudes and evaluations in relation to one's group, extent of ethnic knowledge and commitment, and ethnic behaviors and practices (Phinney, 1991). The acculturation process commonly includes exploring and perhaps modifying one's ethnic identity to incorporate

identification with the new culture. When acculturating, Hispanic Americans may choose, either consciously or unwittingly, how much of their original ethnic identity they will retain and the degree to which they will identify with and assimilate into the United States culture. Moreover, ethnic identity may influence myriad attitudes and behaviors. For example, some research suggests that Hispanic women with low Hispanic identification hold relatively more egalitarian attitudes in the context of marital decision-making (Webster, 1994). Also, discrepancies in ethnic identity between a married couple may create marital distress due to differences in gender-role expectations (Casas, Wagenheim, Banchemo, & Mendoza-Romero, 1994).

Although no published studies have examined the role of acculturative stress on marital distress, a handful of studies have investigated the relation between acculturation and marital functioning among Hispanic couples. In an early study, Tharp, Meadow, Lennhoff, and Satterfield (1968) found that acculturated Mexican American wives generally embraced the notion of egalitarianism for their marital relationships more than less acculturated wives (the latter group were more likely to endorse the idea that husbands ought to be the primary decision-makers in marriages). Based on a fairly large sample ( $n = 550$ ) of Mexican-born wives living in the United States, Vega, Kolody, and Valle (1988) found acculturation to be inversely related to marital distress. Specifically, less acculturated wives reported more marital stress, engaged in more self-denigration, and perceived themselves to have less ability to resolve disputes with their husbands, relative to more acculturated wives.

By contrast, other studies suggest that marital distress is linked to higher levels of acculturation. Casas and Ortiz (1985) compared Mexican- versus U.S.-born Mexican American couples on marital satisfaction and found that the former group (who were immigrants with lower levels of acculturation) reported higher levels of marital accord than the latter group.

Similar findings were obtained by Flores, Tschann, Marin, and Pantoja (2004) who had examined Mexican American couples. Flores et al. concluded that more acculturated Mexican American couples likely are more willing to express and dispute power issues, thereby leading to more conflictual relationships. Negy and Snyder (1997) found that higher levels of acculturation among Mexican American women correlated with higher levels of dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of time spent together with their husbands, and less satisfaction with the sexual component of their relationships; acculturation did not significantly correlate with marital satisfaction for the Mexican American husbands. Also, acculturated Mexican American women were more willing to be critical of their marital relationships than less acculturated Mexican American women, making it unclear if the heightened levels of marital dissatisfaction among acculturated Mexican American women were actually due to higher levels of dissatisfaction or to an increased willingness (relative to less acculturated Mexican American women) to openly criticize their marital relationships.

Three other variables identified in the literature as being linked to marital functioning are social support, the quality of the couple's family-of-origin, and general life stressors. Whether from family members or friends, research has documented an association between social support and protection against harmful effects of stress (e.g., Cutrona, 1996; Finch & Vega, 2003; Wilcox, 1981). Social support involves affirmation of behavior, the expression of positive regard, and the provision of tangible resources in a manner that supports and sustains social relationships (Burlison, Albrecht, & Sarason, 1994). Social support can nourish and validate adaptive acculturation and thus, decrease acculturative stress (Kim, 1988). Moreover, the presumed collectivistic aspects of the Hispanic culture theoretically may provide a steady amount of social support through family relationships. When Hispanic individuals come to the

United States, they often are separated initially from this well-established source of support, and the challenge of acquiring English may impede their ability to quickly develop a new social support network. Research has shown that Hispanic American women report receiving less social support than Hispanic American men (Allen, Amason, & Holmes, 1998), thereby possibly making them more susceptible to the negative consequences of marital distress.

Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler (2000) have suggested that much of Hispanics' social support is "invisible" because immediate and extended family members readily provide fellow-family members with assistance with childcare, offer emotional and financial support, and help foster a sense of security typically without explicit requests for assistance. Further, because Hispanics are more likely to live with family members than the overall U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), they are more likely to experience the protective benefits of family support as they navigate the process of acculturation and subsequent accompanying stress (Cortez, 1995; Hovey & King, 1996; Miranda, Estrada, Firpo-Jiminez, 2000). By contrast, Hispanics who lack the support of a family network are at higher risk for myriad emotional symptomology, including depression and anxiety disorders (e.g., La Roche, Turner, & Kallick, 1995; Solomon, Smith, Robins, & Fischbah, 1987). These psychological symptoms may negatively impact the quality of Hispanics' marital relationships.

The family-of-origin generally is considered the most important social group that influences individuals' formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1994), possibly even more so for Hispanics (Vega, 1990). Healthy family environments presume emotionally supportive intrafamilial relationships that promote feelings of security and acceptance among family members. In contrast, dysfunctional family environments tend to be conflict-ridden and lack the warmth and nurturance necessary for optimum

development (Walsh, 2003). Two studies have documented the linkage between family-of-origin experiences and subsequent functioning in dyadic relationships and procreational families with Hispanics. Santos, Bohon, and Sanchez-Soso (1998) examined the relations among childhood family relationships, adult conflicts in marriage and work relationships, and mental health distress among 135 working-class, Mexican immigrants in southern California. Using a Spanish-language questionnaire eliciting retrospective accounts of the father-child relationship, mother-child relationship, and family conflict, findings indicated that conflictual childhood family relationships correlated positively with subsequent marital dissatisfaction and problematic relationships at places of employment, which in turn related positively with individual impaired functioning and distress. Negy and Snyder (2006) found that Mexican Americans' retrospective recall of the amount of cohesion and conflict in their childhood families-or-origin predicted significantly the quality of both husbands' and wives' current marital relationships. Specifically, the less cohesion and more conflict the couples recalled that were present in their respective childhood families, the more conflict and distress they reported in their marriage.

Finally, many life events may be experienced as stressful. Some of the events include taking a vacation, the death of a loved one, and a change in living environment. Although these events tend to increase one's level of stress, some of the events may be experienced as positive (e.g., vacation), as negative (e.g., the death of a loved one), or as neutral (e.g., a change in living environment). Stress generally increases susceptibility to mental health problems (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1981); elevated and prolonged levels of stress may exhaust one's coping resources, making one more susceptible to mental and physical disorders. Moreover, some life events, such as childbearing or sexual difficulties, have a direct impact on the marital

relationship and satisfaction. For some Hispanics, the pressures to acculturate may represent an additional stressor that might exacerbate psychopathology.

### The Current Study

Although a handful of studies have examined the relation between acculturation and marital distress, no published study has examined the relation between marital distress and the stress that is a direct result of pressures to acculturate. This exploratory study represents an effort to address this void in the literature. A confluence of variables contributes to marital distress. Although some of these variables influence the quality of relationships irrespective of ethnicity (e.g., social support, family-of-origin, general life stressors), other variables (e.g., ethnic identity, level of acculturation) are fairly unique to individuals who are ethnic minorities and/or immigrants living in a country that historically has simultaneously offered both opportunities and racial barriers to those not forming part of the dominant culture. Some or all of these variables likely contribute to or interact with acculturative stress that may in turn, influence marital distress. As a result, these variables were included in this study as a means of controlling for their shared variance with the two variables of primary focus, acculturative stress and marital distress.

Although this study was exploratory in nature, it was hypothesized that acculturative stress would correlate with marital distress. This hypothesis was made based on the notion that stressful major life events—or moderate-scale events that are prolonged and ongoing—tend to create a “ripple effect” and exacerbate the stress experienced in other life domains. This notion has been referred to as the *event vulnerability model* (Pillow, Zautra, & Sandler, 1996). Stress stemming from perceived or real pressures to change one’s values and behaviors in order to “fit” with a culture or society distinct from one’s own may be conceptualized as an ongoing,

moderate-scale life event (Rodriguez et al., 2002). Thus, the effects of acculturative stress were expected to influence the distress experienced in a distinct life domain, such as the marital relationship. As part of this hypothesis, it was expected that one or more of the secondary variables of interest (e.g., ethnic identity, social support, etc.) would partially mediate the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress.

In this study, Hispanic women living in the United States were the targeted respondents. As noted previously, research generally has shown that women, irrespective of ethnicity, experience higher levels of marital stress compared to men. Further, Hispanic women with relatively higher acculturation levels tend to experience higher levels of marital distress compared to less acculturated Hispanic women. Despite some evidence that gender roles and occupational opportunities for Hispanic women—both within and external to the United States—are changing in the direction of equality and egalitarianism (Falicov, 2005), it has been suggested that many Hispanic women may, in various degrees, adhere to self-imposed expectations about their roles and responsibilities, particularly within the contexts of family and marriage (Garcia-Preto, 1990; 1998).



## CHAPTER 2: METHOD AND MATERIALS

### Participants

The sample was comprised of 103 Hispanic American women living in the greater Central Florida region. To qualify for participation, the women had to self-identify as being of Hispanic origin, be at least 18 years of age, and legally married. Participation was voluntary and recruitment was pursued through various means. Graduate and undergraduate students working in a cross-cultural psychology research laboratory assisted with locating potential participants from the general community. Also, participants often provided referral information of other potential participants who were contacted by the researchers to inquire of their willingness to participate in the study. All student recruiters were directed to seek broad representation of Hispanic married women across diverse socioeconomic status and were prohibited from recruiting members of their own immediate family, but were free to draw on their own personal and organizational contacts in the community. Given the frequent reservation of minority group members to participate in research, as noted in the literature (cf. Okazaki & Sue, 1995), it was anticipated that this recruitment strategy might facilitate rather than detract from the sample's representation of diverse married women of Hispanic heritage. Although no formal records were maintained regarding participation rates, informal assessment of the sampling method indicated that approximately 80% of individuals approached had agreed to participate. Research assistants provided participants the study rationale, obtained informed consent, and administered all the questionnaires to the participants in their homes. Participants were not provided any feedback regarding their responses to the questionnaires, but were encouraged to contact the supervising research if they had any questions or concerns. Upon completion of the questionnaires, all

participants received a \$10 gift card from a local department store as compensation for participation.

The Hispanic women self-identified as Puerto Rican ( $n = 39$ ), Cuban American ( $n = 19$ ), Colombian ( $n = 11$ ), Panamanian ( $n = 10$ ), Venezuelan ( $n = 6$ ), Mexican ( $n = 6$ ), Brazilian ( $n = 4$ ), Dominican Republican ( $n = 3$ ), Peruvian ( $n = 3$ ), and two did not specify their specific Hispanic subgroup membership. Regarding country of birth, 85 participants (83 %) were born outside the United States. The average number of years the participants had lived in the U.S. was 20.8 ( $SD = 13.58$ ) and ranged from 1 year to 55 years. The average age of the participants was 40.3 years old ( $SD = 10.01$ ) and ranged from 20 to 70 years of age. The majority of participants reported having attended several years of college, had an average of two children, and reported an average annual family income of over \$70,000. The mean number of years the women had been married was 14.42 ( $SD = 8.66$ ). About twice as many participants elected to complete the questionnaires in English than in Spanish (67% vs. 33%, respectively).

### Measures

Consistent with the Brislin technique for translating questionnaires into a new language (Brislin, 1970), a team of two bilingual (English-Spanish), bicultural researchers initially translated all questionnaires into Spanish. An independent team of two bilingual, bicultural researchers translated the Spanish version of the questionnaires back into English. Afterwards, all four researchers met to examine and compare the English-translated version with the original English version in order to address and resolve inconsistencies in translations. Both language versions of all of the instruments were found to have adequate reliability (reported below).

*Demographic Sheet.* A demographic sheet asked participants to provide their age, gender, ethnicity, place of birth, number of years living in the United States, religious affiliation, marital status, educational level, annual income level, and occupation.

*The Marital Satisfaction Inventory—Revised (MSI-R).* The MSI-R (Snyder, 1997) is a 150-True-False item inventory designed to measure both the intensity and nature of relationship distress in ten domains (e.g., affective communication, problem-solving communication, aggressiveness, conflict over childrearing, disagreement over finances, etc.). For the present study, only the *Global Distress Scale (GDS)* was used as an index of respondents' overall subject appraisal of the quality of their marital relationship (higher scores reflect greater distress). Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the GDS subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .95 (English version), .90 (Spanish version), and .94 (combined).

*Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE).* The SAFE (Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987) is a 24-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess an individual's level of acculturative stress. The SAFE yields a total score and individual scores on its four subscales (Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental). For this study, the total SAFE score was used. Each SAFE item is a statement that participants respond to using a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from "not stressful" to "extremely stressful." A representative item is "It bothers me when people pressure me to assimilate." Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the SAFE was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .92 (English version), .86 (Spanish version), and .91 (combined).

*Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS).* The SMAS (Stephenson, 2000) is a 32-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess an individual's level of acculturation. Each SMAS item is a statement that participant respond to using a 4-point Likert scale; response

options are False, Partly False, Partly True, and True. The SMAS yields a total acculturation score and scores on its two individual subscales (Dominant-society Immersion and Ethnic-society Immersion). The Dominant-society Immersion scale measures the degree to which respondents are acculturated toward the larger, dominant (U.S.) culture, and the Ethnic-society Immersion scale measures the degree to which respondents are enculturated toward their culture of origin. For this study, scores derived from the Dominant-society Immersion and Ethnic-society Immersion scales were used. Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the Dominant-society Immersion subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .60 (English version), .77 (Spanish version), and .75 (combined). The Ethnic-society Immersion subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .81 (English version), .66 (Spanish version), and .79 (combined).

*The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM).* The MEIM (Phinney, 1992) is a 12-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess individuals' level of ethnic identification with their ethnic group. The MEIM yields an overall ethnic identity score and scores on two subscales (Ethnic Identity Search, and Affirmation, Belonging, and Commitment). For this study, the overall ethnic identity score was used. Each MEIM item is a statement that participants respond to using a 4-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the MEIM was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .87 (English version), .86 (Spanish version), and .87 (combined).

*The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS).* Social support was assessed using the 12-item MSPSS (Dahlem, Zimet, & Walker, 1991) to determine participants' perceptions of social support from family members, friends, and significant others. Each item is responded to using a 7-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "very strongly disagree" to

“very strongly agree.” Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the MSPSS was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .96 (English version), .97 (Spanish version), and .97 (combined).

*Family Environment Scale (FES).* The FES (Moos, 1974; Moos & Moos, 1994) is a 90-item, true-false self-report measure intended to assess the actual, preferred, or expected social environment of families. A modified version of the FES was used in this study whereby respondents were instructed to respond to items in reference to their childhood family of origin. Consistent with previous adaptations of this measure (Moos & Moos), items were rewritten in the past tense in order to accommodate respondents’ retrospective assessment of their childhood family climate. The FES contains ten subscales assessing three sets of underlying domains or dimensions related to the respondent’s family social climate. For the present study, two subscales, *Cohesion* and *Conflict*, from the Relationship dimensions were administered to the participants. These subscales assess the degree of commitment, help, and support family members provide to one another, and the degree of conflicts occurring within the family. Based on the present sample of Hispanic women, the Cohesion subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .58 (English version), .72 (Spanish version), and .62 (combined). The Conflict subscale was found to have a Cronbach alpha of .71 (English version), .64 (Spanish version), and .70 (combined).

*The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS).* The SRRS (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) consists of 43 life events that are often reported as stressful. Respondents endorse items they have experienced in the last 12 months. The events vary in their degree of severity and according to Holmes and Rahe, 17 events are considered positive (e.g., vacation), 18 are considered undesirable (e.g., death of a loved one), and eight are considered as neutral events

(e.g., change in working conditions). The way the SRRS was scored for this study was by summing the total number of stressful event respondents had checked. Procedure

Institution Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for this study and student recruitment began in Summer 2006. Undergraduate students enrolled in an undergraduate Psychology class were asked to locate one female adult Hispanic American who is married, not originally from the United States, and who predominately speaks Spanish. The student received one hour extra credit in the class for recruiting the participants. The students were instructed to request the participant to complete the set of questionnaires. Although this manner of recruiting participants is not random, it has been used with success in previous research of a similar nature. Specifically, this selection procedure tends to sample participants from multiple regions within the broader community and across multiple socioeconomic statuses (Negy & Snyder, 1997; 2000). College students were instructed not to seek participation by immediate family members but were free otherwise to rely on their personal and organizational contacts in their respective communities. All of the questionnaires, including the informed consent form (see Appendix I), were provided in English and Spanish.

Each college student who elected to recruit a participant was instructed on the importance of (a) not coercing any participant to complete the questionnaires, (b) instructing the participant that the study is voluntary, and (c) that after the questionnaire is completed, the participants cannot return the questionnaire to the student recruiter, but must mail the questionnaire to the primary researchers in the stamped, addressed envelope that is provided to them.

Once the packet was received, the informed consent sheet (which must be signed and which reveals the identity of the participant) was separated and stored in a locked file cabinet by the principal researcher. At that time, the data from the questionnaires was entered into a SPSS

data file. Afterwards, the questionnaires were shredded, thereby maintaining the anonymity of the participants' identities and maintaining the confidentiality of the data. Participants received \$10.00 after the principal researcher received their envelope with the questionnaires.

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

### Descriptive Information

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the scores obtained on the primary study variables by the Hispanic women. On average, the women reported a level of marital distress ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 3.96$ ) that falls within the normal range obtained by women who served in the national normative sample (Snyder, 1997). Their average responses to the acculturative stress items ( $M$  score = 1.68,  $SD = .59$ ) corresponded to the response option “somewhat stressed,” suggesting that, overall, the women typically did not perceive themselves highly distressed over the pressures to acculturate to the dominant culture. Regarding acculturation, the women’s average score on the SMAS’ dominant-society immersion scale was 3.61 ( $SD = .33$ ), whereas their average score on the SMAS’ ethnic-society immersion scale was 3.17 ( $SD = .34$ ), suggesting that most women had a bicultural orientation, though possibly slightly more adept in the dominant culture. The average ethnic identity score on the MEIM was 3.18 ( $SD = .49$ ), reflective of a high level of loyalty and interest in maintaining their ethnic identity. The average score on the social support scale (MSPSS) was 5.92 ( $SD = .94$ ), suggesting that most women perceived there to be a fair amount of social support available to them from family, friends, or significant others. Based on retrospective recall, as a group, the women reported an average level of both cohesion and conflict in their childhood families ( $M$ s = 6.39 and 2.69 [ $SD$ s = 1.62 and 1.82], respectively) based on the national normative sample (Moos & Moos, 1994). Finally, the average number of stressful life events reported by the women was 7.08 ( $SD = 4.89$ ); given 43 potential life stressors from which to choose, this mean suggests that the women were experiencing a mild level of life stressors during the time frame when this study took place.



## Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 presents the intercorrelations of the variables available for the mediation analysis. Potential mediating variables were tested using the Baron and Kenny (1986) multiple regression approach, which delineates four steps necessary for establishing mediational effects. First, the primary predictor variable of interest (i.e., acculturative stress) must significantly correlate with the primary criterion variable of interest (i.e., marital distress). Second, the predictor variable (i.e., acculturative stress) must significantly correlate with the potential mediator variables. Third, based on a simultaneous multiple regression analysis, the potential mediator variables must significantly correlate with the primary criterion variable (i.e., marital distress) while controlling for the effects of the primary predictor variable (i.e., acculturative stress). Also, as part of this third step, with the predicted mediator in the equation, the impact of the primary predictor variable (i.e., acculturative stress) on the primary criterion variable (i.e., marital distress) must be reduced, relative to the first step. Finally, the regression coefficient for the predictor variable in step 3 must be significantly smaller than the regression coefficient for the predictor variable in step 1. This difference is tested with a *z*-test (Sobel, 1982, as recommended by MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002), and represents a significance test of the mediational relationship.

In order to establish a relationship between the two primary variables of interest, marital distress was regressed on acculturative stress. Results indicated that acculturative stress significantly correlated with marital distress ( $\beta = .33, p < .001$ ).

Next, the potential mediator variables were regressed on acculturative stress in order to establish a relation between the predictor variable (acculturative stress) and the potential mediator variable. As shown in Table 2, acculturative stress was found to significantly contribute

to the prediction of five potential mediator variables (social support, stressful life events, dominant-society immersion, family-of-origin cohesion, and years in the U.S.). Acculturative stress did not significantly correlate with ethnic-society immersion, ethnic identity, family-of-origin conflict, age, education, or annual income.

Next, the potential mediator variables (social support, stressful life events, dominant-society immersion, family-of-origin cohesion, and years in the U.S.) were tested to determine if each significantly predicted marital distress while controlling for the effect of acculturative stress, as well as to determine if the effect of acculturative stress on marital distress was reduced with the mediator in the equation. To test social support, marital distress was regressed on both acculturative stress and social support, revealing that with both acculturative stress and social support in the equation, social support was significantly predictive of marital distress ( $\beta = -.26, p < .05$ ), and the effect of acculturative stress on marital distress was significantly reduced, ( $\beta = .21, p < .05$ ;  $z\text{-test} = -2.03, p < .05$ ) (see Figure 1).

To test stressful life events, marital distress was regressed on both acculturative stress and stressful life events, revealing that with both acculturative stress and stressful life events in the equation, stressful life events were significantly predictive of marital distress ( $\beta = .25, p < .05$ ), and the effect of acculturative stress on marital distress was significantly reduced ( $\beta = .25, p < .05$ ;  $z\text{-test} = 1.98, p < .05$ ) (see Figure 2).

Dominant-society immersion, family-of-origin cohesion, and years in the U.S. did not significantly predict marital distress while controlling for acculturative stress. Thus, they were determined not to mediate the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

It was hypothesized that acculturative stress would significantly predict marital stress among Hispanic married women. The data supported the hypothesis. Pressure to acculturate toward the dominant culture of the U.S. significantly correlated with distress the women reported in their marital relationships. As had been expected, two variables were found to partially mediate that correlation. Social support and relatively recent stressful life events attenuated the observed relation between acculturative stress and marital distress. Stated differently, social support and recent stressful events acted as partial mechanisms by which acculturative stress affected marital distress. The more Hispanic women experienced pressures to acculturate, the less support they perceived themselves to have from family, friends, and significant others, thereby raising the distress they experienced in their marital relationships. This effect also was observed with recent stressful life events. The more stress they experienced related to the pressures to acculturate, the more likely they perceived other life events as stressful, again, thereby raising their levels of marital distress.

Taken together, these findings may be viewed as unremarkable given the reasonableness of expecting stress in one area of life to potentially exacerbate stress experienced in other areas of life—an idea conveyed in the event vulnerability model (Pillow et al., 1996). However, in addition to these data establishing a link between acculturative stress and marital distress among Hispanic women, the findings have broader implications in the context of therapy. In addition to addressing relationship concerns, mental health professionals treating Hispanic women or couples who present for marital therapy should assess, and treat as necessary, acculturative stress. This may be accomplished by exploring ways to confront the pressures to acculturate. For example, some Hispanic women (as well as men), may feel compelled to relinquish native values

and customs and adopt behaviors consistent with the dominant culture in which they find themselves. Although change is inevitable and sometimes even adaptive, helping Hispanic women understand they have the freedom to select the changes they make has intrinsic therapeutic value. Such awareness of selective change would provide Hispanic women with a sense of empowerment and control that might be foregone otherwise by adhering to the belief that acculturative changes are events that “happen to them” irrespective of their own wishes and actions.

Further, this study delineated two variables that may reduce (or exacerbate, if undressed) both acculturative stress and marital distress among Hispanic women. The availability of social support in one or more forms (e.g., emotional, moral, economic) is widely known to aid individuals faced with myriad problems (Cutrona, 1996; Finch & Vega, 2003; Wilcox, 1981) These data indicate that the absence of social support compounds the effect of acculturative stress on marital distress. Stated differently, having family and friends on whom Hispanic women may count for support was associated with less acculturative and marital distress, and appears to mitigate the effects of acculturative stress on marital distress. This finding highlights the importance of Hispanic married women to identify and utilize individuals (or possibly agencies, such as a church, community support groups) during difficult times who may help them with advice, child support, economic assistance, or even with their friendship. Mental health professionals may advise Hispanic women or couples of the benefits of judicious usage of social support, including helping them to identify sources in their social circle or community from whom to seek assistance.

As with social support, it was found that recent stressful events in general were associated with increases in acculturative stress and marital distress, and appears to exacerbate

the effects of acculturative stress on marital distress. Mental health professionals treating Hispanic women for marital problems should openly probe for other events occurring in their clients' lives in order to determine if other sources of stress apart from the pressures to acculturate are affecting their marital relationships, particularly Hispanic women who may be experiencing undue pressures to acculturate to the larger U.S. culture. With a therapist's guidance, Hispanic women may need to prioritize the array of challenges or problems they wish to address in therapy, with the goal being to obtain symptomatic relief from the compounding effects of stress.

Although there was considerable variation, as a group, the present sample of Hispanic women had levels of marital distress that were within the "normal" range for married women in the general U.S. population. Also, they had mild levels of acculturative stress, had experienced a relatively low number of recent stressful life events, and based on retrospective recall, reported having had a "normal" or average level of cohesion and conflict in their childhood families. Those findings notwithstanding, simultaneously occurring minor stressors often account for greater variance in symptomology than do major life events (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982). Moreover, the relation between acculturative stress and marital distress likely is particularly complex for Hispanic women (Padilla & Borrero, 2006). Researchers (Casas & Ortiz, 1985; Flores et al., 2004; Negy & Snyder, 1997) have discussed the struggles some Hispanic women may experience as a result of competing culturally-defined gender roles and expectations in the context of relationships. It is conceivable that some Hispanic women experience pressures—either from husbands and family members, or from self-imposed internalized values—to adhere to traditional gender roles within their relationships while simultaneously experiencing pressures—either from contemporary U.S. culture or by choice—to

adopt and practice egalitarian gender roles that are consistent with mainstream U.S. social norms. Such a situation underscores the need for therapists to address acculturative stress and its ramifications with Hispanic women and their husbands in treatment for marital therapy.

The present study had several limitations that warrant noting. There is not universal agreement about the extent to which mediation models indicate causality, thus, studies based on mediational analyses may not show causality among study variables (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2004). The present data may not indicate with certainty if acculturative stress directly causes marital distress or if social support and stressful life events cause marital distress. It is reasonable to assume that many variables may contribute to marital distress among Hispanic women, some which were not included in this study, such as occupational stress, the demands related to caring for aging parents, even stress related to discrimination (Sue et al., 2007). It also is possible that direction of causality may be reversed (i.e., marital distress leads to increased acculturative stress, as when one spouse pressures the other to change [or not to change]). Also, participants in this study were not randomly selected and were not uniformly from all Latin American countries or regions. Common to non-random samples, the Hispanic women in this study also were disproportionately from better educated and higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Although these findings may generalize to Hispanic women who may seek professional assistance for marital concerns, the findings may not generalize to Hispanic women who trace their ancestry to other parts of Latin America or who are of other socioeconomic backgrounds.

#### Future Research

It would be helpful to understand more about the mechanisms by which acculturative stress and marital distress are related. Although it would be difficult ethically to manipulate

acculturative stress and marital distress, it might be possible to examine data on the timeline when acculturative stress occurs to determine if marital distress precedes or follows the onset of acculturative stress. Also, Hispanic women were the participants of focus in this study due to their presumed heightened levels of stress in their marital relationships. Future studies should include Hispanic men in order to gain additional insight into the complex relation between acculturative stress and marital distress (e.g., Hispanic husbands' own acculturative stress may contribute to their wives' marital distress and vice versa). Finally, as indicated above, there are other sources of stress in Hispanic women's lives besides the ones included in this study that may contribute to marital distress. We focused on acculturative stress because of its uniqueness to ethnic minorities and immigrants and its potential for being neglected in the treatment of marital distress among Hispanic women in both research and applied settings. Future research should expand this line of research by including other critical variables involved in both acculturative stress and marital distress.

## CHAPTER 5: TABLES

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Standard Deviations</i>
Age	40.30	10.01
Years in the U.S.	20.81	13.58
Years Married	14.42	8.66
Education (in years)	15.01	2.20
Annual Family Income <sup>a</sup>	5.72	2.25
Marital Distress <sup>b</sup>	3.68	3.96
Acculturative Stress <sup>c</sup>	1.68	.59
Dominant Society Immersion <sup>d</sup>	3.68	.33
Ethnic Society Immersion <sup>e</sup>	3.17	3.4
Ethnic Identity <sup>f</sup>	3.18	.49
Social Support <sup>g</sup>	5.92	.94
Family-of-Origin Cohesion <sup>h</sup>	6.39	1.62
Family-of-Origin Conflict <sup>i</sup>	2.69	1.82
Stressful Life Events <sup>j</sup>	7.08	4.89

<sup>a</sup>Annual Family Income based on 1 = less than \$10,000; 2 = \$10,000 - \$20,000; 3 = \$20,000 - \$30,000; 4 = \$30,000 - \$40,000; 5 = \$40,000 - \$50,000; 6 = \$50,000 - \$60,000; 7 = \$60,000 - \$70,000; 8 = more than \$70,000.

<sup>b</sup>Marital Distress as measured by the Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (MSI-R).

<sup>c</sup>Acculturative Stress as measured by the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE).

<sup>d</sup>Dominant Society Immersion as measured by the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS).

<sup>e</sup>Ethnic Society Immersion as measured by the Ethnic subscale of the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS).

<sup>f</sup>Ethnic Identity as measured by the Multidimensional Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM).

<sup>g</sup>Social Support as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS).

<sup>h</sup>Family Cohesion as measured by the Cohesion subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES).

<sup>i</sup>Family Conflict as measured by the Conflict subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES).

<sup>j</sup>Life Stressors as measured by the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS).



Table 2. Intercorrelations Between Marital Distress, Acculturative Stress, and Potential Mediating Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Marital Distress <sup>a</sup>	-													
2. Acculturative Stress <sup>b</sup>	.33*	-												
3. Dominant Society Immersion <sup>c</sup>	-.15	-.33*	-											
4. Ethnic Society Immersion <sup>d</sup>	-.05	.13	.10*	-										
5. Ethnic Identity <sup>e</sup>	.01	.18	.07	.38*	-									
6. Social Support <sup>f</sup>	-.31*	-.22*	.14	.14	.16	-								
7. Family Cohesion <sup>g</sup>	-.20*	-.29*	.10	.17	-.01	.50*	-							
8. Family Conflict <sup>h</sup>	.28*	.18	.06	-.06	.10	-.44*	-.32*	-						
9. Life Stressors <sup>i</sup>	.33*	-.28*	.02	-.13	.01	-.28*	-.20*	.27*	-					
10. Age <sup>j</sup>	.16	.10	.04	.14	.15	-.10	.10	-.05	-.23*	-				
11. Years in U.S. <sup>k</sup>	-.12	-.36*	.53*	-.30*	-.12	.04	.10	.05	-.08	.26*	-			
12. Education <sup>l</sup>	.04	-.03	.10	-.06	.15	.27*	.26*	-.15	.00	.19	-.01	-		
13. Family Income <sup>m</sup>	-.19	-.17	.22*	-.09	.10	.15	.23*	-.06	-.19	.10	.24*	.42*	-	
14. Length of Marriage	.13	.18	.12	.03	.11	-.10	.06	-.05	-.18	.65*	.15	.21*	.17	-

Note. \* $p < .05$

<sup>a</sup>Marital Distress as measured by the Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (MSI-R).

<sup>b</sup>Acculturative Stress as measured by the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE).

<sup>c</sup>Dominant Society Immersion as measured by the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS).

<sup>d</sup>Ethnic Society Immersion as measured by the Ethnic subscale of the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS).

<sup>f</sup>Social Support as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS).

<sup>g</sup>Family Cohesion as measured by the Cohesion subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES).

<sup>h</sup>Family Conflict as measured by the Conflict subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES).

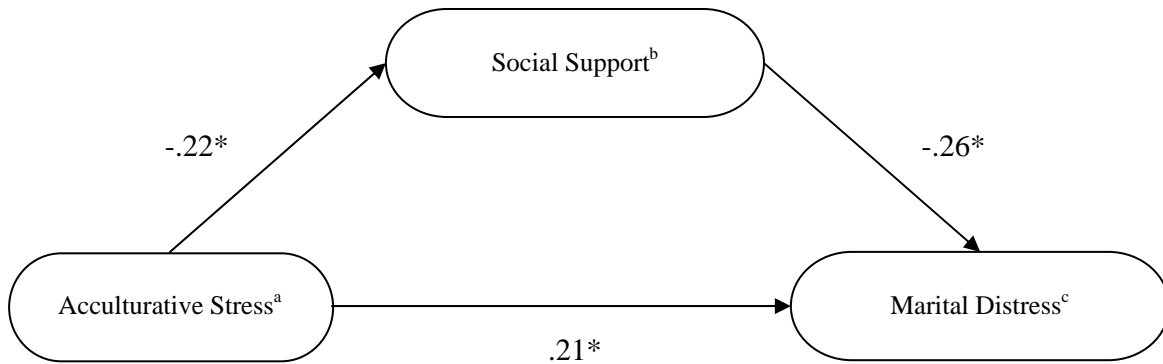
<sup>i</sup>Life Stressors as measured by the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS).

<sup>j</sup>Age as measured by participant's age

<sup>k</sup>Years in U.S. as measured by number of years living in the U.S.

<sup>l</sup>Education as measured by highest level of completed education

<sup>m</sup>Family Income as measured by average annual family income



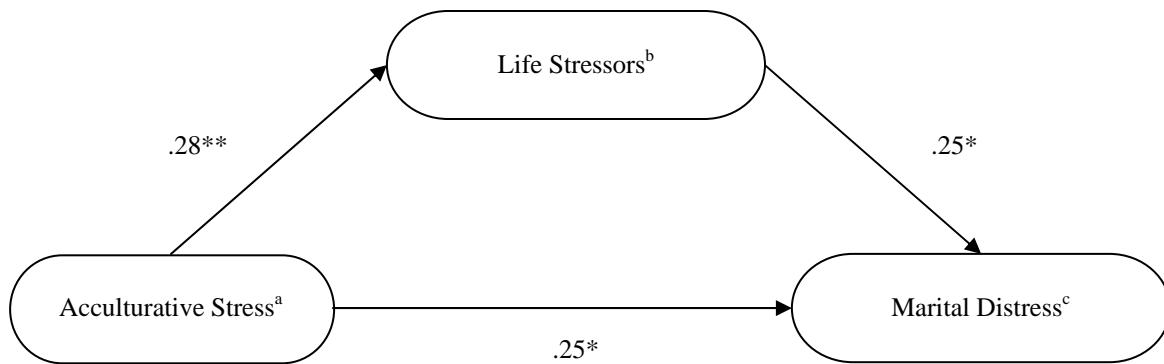
Note.  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$

<sup>a</sup>Acculturative Stress as measured by the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE).

<sup>b</sup>Social Support as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS).

<sup>c</sup>Marital Distress as measured by the Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory Revised (MSI-R).

Figure 1. Mediation model for perceived social support. Standardized regression values appear along arrows.



Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

<sup>a</sup>Acculturative Stress as measured by the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE).

<sup>b</sup>Life Stressors as measured by the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS).

<sup>c</sup>Marital Distress as measured by the Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory Revised (MSI-R).

Figure 2. Mediation model for stressful life events. Standardized regression values appear along arrows.

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