

Associations Among Familism, Language Preference, and Education in Mexican-American Mothers and Their Children

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ABSTRACT. Latino families who express a higher degree of familism are characterized by positive interpersonal familial relationships, high family unity, social support, interdependence in the completion of daily activities, and close proximity with extended family members. Retention of cultural values, such as familism, may be linked to positive health outcomes; however, little is known about how families retain culture of origin values in the face of acculturation pressures. The current study explores acculturation influences as indexed by language preference and household education on maternal and child familism. Mothers and children of Mexican descent (fourth grade students) ($n = 219$) completed measures of demographics, household education, language preference, and familism. Three hypotheses were examined. *First*, we predicted that lower household education would be correlated with higher familism scores. However, contrary to our prediction, a higher familism score was significantly associated with a higher level of household education ($p < .05$). *Second*, we predicted that higher child familism would be associated with the preference for speaking Spanish. Children who preferred to use both English and Spanish ($p < .01$) or English alone ($p < .05$) had higher familism scores than those who preferred Spanish. *Third*, we predicted that lower child familism scores would be associated with greater differences in mother and child language preferences. There were no significant differences in child familism based on differences between parent and child language. Protective influences of cultural maintenance deserve further attention in longitudinal studies and in relation to the physical and mental health of youth. *J Dev Behav Pediatr* 025:34–40, 2004. Index terms: *Familism, language preference, Mexican-American.*

It is helpful for clinicians who work with families from different cultures to be aware of normative beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices that are commonly identified in a particular group. But it is also crucially important to recognize that there is often as much variation in beliefs and practices within groups as among different groups. Knowledge of such variability guards against stereotyping. This article describes differences in expression of a common traditional cultural value (familism) within a group of

Mexican-American families based on the level of acculturation and other sociodemographic factors. Results show that the relationships among these variables are complex and require further study. —Editor

Familism is a construct that reflects the collectivistic nature of Latino culture, in other words, the orientation toward the welfare of the group.¹ Latino families who express a higher degree of familism are characterized by positive interpersonal familial relationships, high family unity, social support, interdependence in the completion of daily activities, and close proximity with extended family members.^{2–6}

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Higher levels of familism are associated with positive health outcomes such as lower youth substance use, later initiation of immigrant youth drug use, lower juvenile delinquency rates, lower rates of child abuse, and higher use rates of mammographic services.⁷⁻¹³ As a result, health researchers have become interested in how the maintenance of culture of origin values influences the ways in which people adapt to new cultures.¹⁴⁻¹⁸ It is known, for example, that family conflict may increase when family members shed cultural values and adopt new values at different rates.^{14,19} In two studies investigating the perception of different rates of acculturation within families, higher prevalence of substance use and lower levels of self-esteem were detected among Latino youth who perceived larger intergenerational differences in cultural values.^{20,21} The maintenance of culture of origin values such as familism may decelerate the rate of acculturation within families, leading to less intergenerational strife and better health outcomes.

In this article, we examine associations between familism and level of acculturation as indexed by language preference in Mexican-American mothers and their children. To date, the relevant literature is limited to a few case reports and a handful of studies with adult children.^{19,22,23} In these studies, higher education level was the only significant covariate with lower familism among Puerto Rican parents and adult children.²³

In general, the hypotheses guiding our study express the rationale that English language preference and higher education will reduce the extent to which family members embrace values rooted in the culture of origin. The study examined the following specific hypotheses: (1) Higher maternal familism will be associated with lower household education level. (2) Higher child familism will be associated with a preference for Spanish language. (3) Lower child familism will be associated with greater differences in mother and child language preferences.

METHODS

Participants

Fourth grade students (N = 845) (mean = 9.5 years; SD = 0.37) enrolled in eight northern California urban elementary schools were surveyed as part of a study on obesity prevention. Both school districts were chosen for their lower socioeconomic status profiles (more than half of students receive a free or reduced lunch) and high levels of ethnic diversity within schools. The study was introduced to the parents and children as a health-promotion program for youth. Of the total eligible children, 719 (85%) completed survey assessments; 10 parents refused participation for their children. All eligible children who did not participate were either absent or unavailable on assessment days; 47.3% of the total sample were children of Latino descent (340/719). Parent/guardian telephone interviews were attempted for all eligible Latino children; 75.6% of the interviews (257/340) were completed, of which 89% (229/257) were completed by parents who chose "Mexican" or "Mexican-American" as their ethnic group from a list of ethnic labels. Only children with mothers of

Mexican descent who completed the telephone interview (N = 219) were included in the analyses for the current study; sample sizes of other ethnic groups were too small for statistical comparisons. The major reason that parent telephone interviews were not conducted was a problem telephone number (either disconnected or wrong number) (N = 28, 8.3% of total Latino parent sample). The secondary reason was that phone interviewers ran out of study time (2 months allotment for completion of phone interviews) to contact all participants (N = 27; 8% of total Latino parent sample). The child sample with mothers of Mexican descent included 113 boys (52%) and 106 girls (48%). The Stanford University Panel on Human Subjects in Medical Research approved the study.

Procedure

To ensure confidentiality, students were assigned a special identification number. Each survey contained two cover sheets, the first including a printed label with the student's name and identification number and the second including a label containing only the identification number. Data collectors removed and destroyed the first cover sheet when they collected the survey. Children completed questionnaires during a regular class period. The survey was read aloud to the entire class and took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Assessments were performed by trained bilingual and bicultural project staff. Surveys were prepared with facing pages written in English and Spanish. Students were asked in English and Spanish to raise their hand if they preferred to have the survey read to them in Spanish or English. The survey was then read aloud to groups of children in their language of choice. The language preference procedure was found most effective and efficient during pilot testing with a similar sample comparing three different procedures of language selection. Seventy-nine percent of the sample of children of Mexican descent had the survey read to them in English, and 21% had it read in Spanish. Except for one subject who filled out the survey in Spanish, but was read the survey in English, all subjects filled out the survey in the language as the one read aloud to them during the survey administration.

All parent interviews were conducted over the telephone by trained bilingual and bicultural project staff. Phone interviews were conducted in English or Spanish as preferred by the parent. Of the 219 interviews of mothers of Mexican descent in the current sample, 38 (17.4%) were completed in English and 181 (82.6%) in Spanish. The primary target adult in the household was the mother. The majority of the interviews required 10 to 15 minutes for completion. Active consent was obtained over the telephone and recorded.

Measures

Demographics. Children reported their gender and date of birth. Parents reported their own gender and ethnic label (chosen from a list of ethnic labels).

Child Language Preference. Child language preference was assessed with separate questions per language (English and Spanish) in reference to (1) being at home, (2) being

Table 1. Household Education Level by Mother Language Preference

	Less than Eighth grade		Less than High School		High School Equivalent		Less than College		College Grad or Higher	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
English preference	1	2	3	12	19	28	10	21	4	25
Both languages	9	15	9	35	22	32	20	43	8	50
Spanish preference	51	84	14	54	28	41	17	36	4	25

$\chi^2 = 41.77, df = 8, p < .0001.$

with friends, and (3) watching TV. The total six items were selected from the Language Use subscale of the Bidimensional Acculturation Scale (BAS) for Hispanics.²⁴ A briefer subscale was chosen from the full BAS to include fewer questions because of the limited amount of time available for measurement with the child sample. This subscale had acceptable reliability in previous work with Latino adult samples (internal consistency coefficient was >0.83).²⁴ Response items were modified for a younger sample to simplify the range from 1 to 4 to 1 = all the time, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = never by dropping the response item “often” (*Appendix*). The responses were averaged across the three items per language. English and Spanish preferences were dichotomized into “high” or “low” separately based on the median score. Three levels of language preference were created based on the following categories: (1) Spanish preference (low English), (2) bilingual preference (high English and high Spanish), and (3) English preference (high English and low Spanish).

Child Familism. Child familism was measured with the Family Impact Scale, which was developed for diverse adolescents.²⁵ This measure has demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$) with a similar sample of Mexican-American middle-school aged youth.²⁶ Less familism with this scale has been found to be associated with more depressive symptoms and negative attitudes toward substance use.^{25,26} The Family Impact scale is composed of 11 items assessing both values and behaviors. Sample items include questions about eating dinner with your family, doing fun things with your family, thinking that your family makes you feel good, feeling close to family, and respecting the advice of your family. These items have a three-item response range (2 = every day, 1 = sometimes, 0 = never, 2 = I agree, 1 = I do not know, and 0 = I disagree) (*Appendix*). In our sample, Cronbach’s alpha = 0.66 with 11 items.

Household Education Level. Mothers reported the highest education level achieved for themselves and up to one other parent/guardian living in the house. Possible responses ranged from sixth grade or less to a graduate degree. The highest education level for the household was used in the analysis. Some categories were collapsed because of low frequencies: “Sixth grade or less” and “eighth grade or less” were combined, as were categories including and above “4-year college graduate.”

Mother Language Preference. Mother language preference was assessed separately for English and Spanish. The two items were selected from the Language Use subscale of the BAS for Hispanics.²⁴ Response items ranged from 1 = almost always to 4 = almost never (*Appendix*).

Language levels were dichotomized into “high” or “low” for English language preference and Spanish language preference. Three levels of language preference were created based on the following categories: (1) Spanish preference (low English), (2) bilingual preference (high English and high Spanish), and (3) English preference (high English and low Spanish).

Mother Familism. A scale of familism was used to assess the mother’s familism, which was developed for collectivistic groups (including Latino) and has been found to be reliable with collectivistic adult populations with an average reliability of $\alpha = 0.88$.² Acceptable internal and external validity were indicated for the familism scale with a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis; positive factor loadings were greater than 0.40 and had significant z scores (confirmatory factor analysis results: *df* ratio = 1.12, $\chi^2 = 184.05, df = 164, NS$).² The scale is composed of nine items scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Sample items include “my family is there for me in times of need,” “I value the time I spend with relatives,” and “I keep alive traditions of my family” (*Appendix*). In previous studies, this scale has been found to be reliable among different ethnic groups (including Latinos) and both genders.¹ One item, “when it comes to helping others, blood really is thicker than water,” was dropped because it did not correlate highly with other items ($r = .42$) in our sample. Internal consistency for the remaining eight-item scale was $\alpha = 0.90$.

RESULTS

Baseline Characteristics

Household education level, mother language preference, and child language preference are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The mean value for child familism was mean = 1.5 (SD = 0.25) within a range of 0.18 to 2.0 based on a 0 to 2 scale with 2 indicating the most agreement. The mean

Table 2. Language Preferences of Mothers and Children

	n	%
Child		
English preference	74	34
Both languages	78	35
Spanish preference	65	30
Unknown	2	1
Mother		
English preference	37	17
Both languages	68	31
Spanish preference	114	52

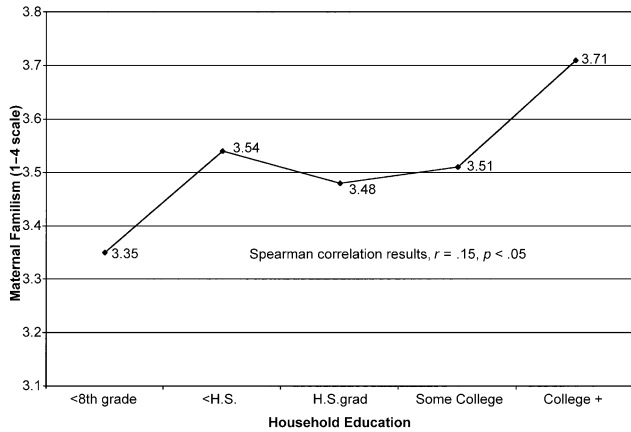


FIGURE 1. Hypothesis 1a: Maternal familism will be associated with lower household education.

value for maternal familism was mean = 3.5 (SD = 0.44) with a range of 2.4 to 4.00 based on a 1 to 4 scale with 4 indicating the most agreement. Although mother and child familism scores were not associated ($r = -.03, p > .05$), mother and child language preferences were moderately correlated ($r = .41, p < .01$).

Hypothesis 1: Higher Maternal Familism Will Be Associated with Lower Household Education. The results for this hypothesis were significant, but not in the hypothesized direction. Higher household education was associated with higher maternal familism scores ($r = .15, p < .05$) (Fig. 1). Spearman correlations between maternal familism and education level were computed separately for each category of maternal language preference. Education level was significantly and positively correlated with maternal familism scores only in the Spanish Language group ($r = .24, p < .01$) (Fig. 2). Other correlations did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Hypothesis 2: Higher Child Familism Will Be Associated with Preference for Spanish. This hypothesis was not supported. A Kruskal-Wallis three-way comparison ($\chi^2 = 8.10, p < .05$) with pairwise Mann-Whitney rank sum

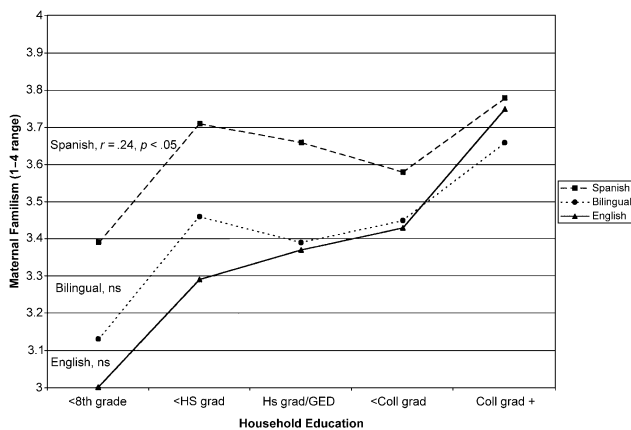


FIGURE 2. Hypothesis 1b: Maternal familism by household education and language preference of mother. Results are based on Spearman correlation results.

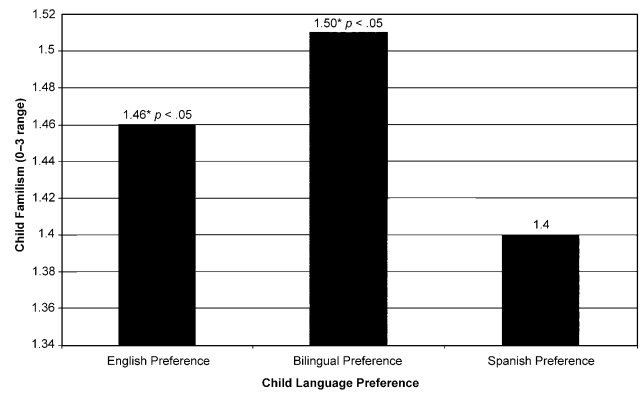


FIGURE 3. Hypothesis 2: Higher child familism will be associated with Spanish preference. Kruskal-Wallis analysis results: $\chi^2 = 8.10, p < .05$. *Significant difference compared with Spanish preferred.

analyses was computed (Fig. 3). Both children with bilingual preference (mean = 1.50 [SD = 0.24], $\chi^2 = 6.66, p < .01$) and children who preferred English (mean = 1.46 [SD = 0.30], $\chi^2 = 5.62, p < .05$) endorsed familism values significantly more than children who preferred Spanish (mean = 1.40 [SD = 0.21]) (Fig. 3). The familism scores of children who preferred bilingualism and children who preferred English were not significantly different.

Hypothesis 3: Lower Child Familism Will Be Associated with Greater Differences in Mother and Child Language Preferences. This hypothesis was not supported. A t test comparing familism scores of children whose language preference was different than their mothers (mean = 1.45, SD = 0.27) and familism scores of children whose language preference matched their mothers (mean = 1.47, SD = 0.23) were not significant at the p less than .05 level (Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

This is the first study to examine correlations between familism, language preference, and education in a sample of

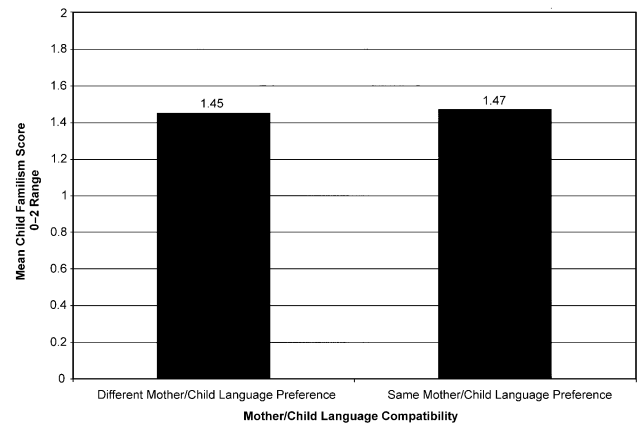


FIGURE 4. Hypothesis 3: Difference in child familism scores based on mother/child language compatibility; t test results were non-significant.

mothers of Mexican descent and their offspring. The primary results were as follows.

First, mother and child familism scores were not correlated. This finding is surprising in that previous research with other ethnic groups has documented that mothers and children have high levels of agreement on cultural values.^{27,28} It is not clear why the results were null. The fact that familism tends to be unusually high among Latinos makes it more likely that low variance in reported familism will decrease the likelihood of achieving statistical significance.^{23,29,30} The current study used different measures to gauge familism in mothers and children, which may have impacted the null results. The scales used in the current study do not have established measurement equivalence with each other. In addition, the differences in response items and range of responses prevent direct comparisons in scores. The child familism measure included specific behavioral items along with value items, whereas items on the parental measure addressed only values and attitudes. It is possible that the scales used in the current study were not accurately measuring the same concept of familism.

Second, among mothers who preferred Spanish as their primary language, higher household education levels were correlated with higher familism scores. This result differs from findings reported for families of Puerto Rican descent, although the assessment tools are different in the current study.²³ Differences in culture change and education are likely to exist between Latino ethnic groups and should be considered in future studies. Whereas the study with Puerto Rican families included parents and children educated in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland, the current study did not measure the years of education in the country of origin. This is a limitation in the interpretation of the findings of the current study. For example, it is not clear whether more education in Mexico is associated with higher cultural values. A strength of the current study is that a wide range of education levels for both English and Spanish speakers were included in the sample.

Third, Mexican-Americans tend to lose certain traditional cultural values as they embrace English and lose fluency in Spanish.^{31,32} This was not the case in our sample. Children who preferred speaking Spanish had lower familism scores than those who reported speaking both languages. The measurement of language use in the current study was limited to only six items; thus, our results should be interpreted with limited generalization. A more complete measure of language use and language proficiency is recommended for future studies to rule out language measurement flaws. These results may indicate that first-generation families (immigrants) may have fewer family members who live nearby in the United States, because other family members may remain in Mexico. Thus, opportunities for family interaction may be low among immigrant families, which may be reflected in our findings because our familism measure also assesses quantity of time with family.

Previous research has often not assessed maintenance of the Spanish language as well as maintenance of the English language.^{24,31} Yet, recent acculturation research has docu-

mented that the maintenance of Spanish, as well as learning English, is common among Latinos.^{31,33} Perhaps children who are able to maintain both languages may be better equipped to retain values espoused by their culture of origin. Children who speak both English and Spanish may be bicultural in that they are participating and integrating both cultures.³⁴ Szapocznik and Kurtines²⁰ have argued that biculturality is the most adaptive outcome for Latinos because the nature of their environment is bicultural. One study has found that bicultural families report less conflict and higher adaptability.³⁵ Future research might benefit from including measures of bilingualism and biculturalism to enhance understanding of cultural maintenance and influence on health behaviors.^{24,33}

Finally, we hypothesized that differences in language preference between mother and child would result in lower familism scores. Contrary to our expectations, familism was not associated with differences in family language preference. Relatively high correlations between mother and child language preference were found. The implications of this result are unclear. More research will be needed to better understand differences within families for parent and child language and cultural values. Future studies may consider more complete measures of self-reported language preference, as well as objective measures of language fluency. Additional measures of other covariates may also provide a better understanding of within family differences, such as mother's generation, occupational status, and marital status. Moreover, changes in language and familism were not ascertained in the current study because the data are cross-sectional. Future longitudinal studies investigating language preference and familism within families would be able to assess language and cultural change within families.

There are many clinical implications of these findings, in that familism is linked with positive health outcomes, such as less child abuse, less substance use, less smoking, and higher mammogram use.^{7,8,12,13} The findings of the current study indicate that children who prefer speaking both English and Spanish have higher levels of familism compared with children who prefer speaking Spanish. Children who are comfortable speaking both languages may be better able to communicate within multigenerational and multilingual families, which may benefit family functioning and family health. Our results indicate that the direction of association between education and familism in mothers of Mexican descent who prefer speaking Spanish was opposite to that reported with Puerto Ricans.²³ However, there are possible measurement flaws in maternal and child familism and language preference in the current study that may limit generalizability. It is not clear yet how education impacts cultural values in different Latino ethnic groups, yet it seems to merit further attention. Although familism has been associated with positive health outcomes, there is still much to learn about the mechanism through which retention of cultural values affects Latino family health.

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APPENDIX

Maternal Language Preference

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>A. Do you speak a language other than English?</p> <p>(1) NO (if no then skip the following three items)</p> <p>(2) YES</p> | <p>B. What is the other language that you speak?</p> <p>(1) Spanish</p> <p>(2) Other</p> |
|--|--|

- C. How often do you speak the language?
- (1) Almost always
 - (2) Often
 - (3) Sometimes
 - (4) Almost never

- D. How often do you speak English?
- (1) Almost always
 - (2) Often
 - (3) Sometimes
 - (4) Almost never

Child Familism Scale

	Every Day	Sometimes	Never
1. How often do you eat dinner with your family?	0	0	2
2. How often do you play sports with your family?	0	1	2
3. How often do you do fun things with your family (things like movies, parties, festivals, sports, hobbies, or picnics)?	0	1	2
4. How often do you spend quiet time with your family (things like listening to music, taking a walk, reading together, or watching TV)?	0	1	2
5. How often do you talk with your family?	0	1	2
6. How often does your family say things that make you feel good?	0	1	2
7. How often does your family say things that help you try harder?	0	1	2
8. How often do you ask your family for help?	0	1	2
	I agree	I don't know	I disagree
9. I respect what my family says.	0	1	2
10. My family is special to me.	0	1	2
11. I am close to my family.	0	1	2

Mother Familism Scale

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. When it comes to helping others, blood really is thicker than water.	1	2	3	4
2. My family is always there for me in times of need.	1	2	3	4
3. I owe it to my parents to do well in life.	1	2	3	4
4. I know that my family has my best interests in mind.	1	2	3	4
5. I value the time that I spend with my relatives.	1	2	3	4
6. I will do all that I can to keep alive the traditions passed on to me by my parents and grandparents.	1	2	3	4
7. Even when I'm far away from home, my family ties keep me feeling safe and secure.	1	2	3	4
8. To this day, my parent's teachings serve as my best guide to behavior.	1	2	3	4
9. I cannot imagine what I would do without my family.	1	2	3	4

Child Language Preference

	Never	Sometimes	All the time
1. How often do you speak English at home?	1	2	3
2. How often do you speak a language that is not English at home?	1	2	3
3. How often do you speak English with your friends?	1	2	3
4. How often do you speak a language that is not English with your friends?	1	2	3
5. How often do you watch TV in English?	1	2	3
6. How often do you watch TV in a language that is not English?	1	2	3