

The Current Study

Introduction:

While researchers have studied Latinx immigrants as an overall group, there is a dearth of scholarship that focuses on disaggregated data of Latinx immigrants relative to their legal status. The current study is an attempt to begin to understand the mental health differences among Latinx documented and undocumented immigrants. A sample of 229 participants who sought psychological services were compared by their legal status to examine differences in mental health symptoms utilizing the DSM-V Self-Rated Cross-Cutting Measure for Adults.

Background:

The “immigrant paradox” is a leading theory that describes the tendency for immigrants to present with better health than expected, despite increased stress exposure related to the act of migrating and adjusting to a new country. Present literature describes prevalence of depression and anxiety among Latinx immigrants (Roblyer et al., 2017; Alegria et al., 2007), while other studies have found that endorsement of mental health symptoms and experiences may vary across legal status (Cuevas & Sabina, 2010; Sabina et al., 2012, 2013; Zadnik et al., 2016). Authors have described that “under-reporting” symptoms may be a habit among Latinx immigrants (Heilemann et al., 2004; Garcini et al., 2017), which may challenge the immigrant paradox.

Methodology

The research design for the current study is an archival, non-experimental design given that data was derived from client files from an outpatient clinic in Southern California. The sample included a total of 263 adult participants, 229 of which were Latinx immigrants who identified as undocumented (n=126) or documented (n=103) and U.S. born (n=34). Participant data included a completed DSM-V Self-Rated Level 1 Cross-Cutting Symptom Measure, Adult Version; a 23-item questionnaire organized into 13 symptom domains (see Table 1). The total score would be indicative of overall mental health level, with higher scores indicating poorer mental health. Additional demographic variables included: preferred language, country of origin, gender identity, current visa document (if applicable), and reason for referral (e.g. seeking therapy, immigration report, or a combination of services).

Hypotheses:

- (1) Undocumented Latinx immigrant participants will demonstrate higher severity in mental health symptoms than documented participants.
- (2) Latinx participants, regardless of their legal status, will most frequently report symptom domains of “Depression”, “Anxiety”, and “Somatic Symptoms”.

Statistical Analyses:

Hypothesis 1 was evaluated using an independent samples t-test to test for significant mean differences between both groups. For hypothesis 2, a descriptive frequency analysis allowed for the most-frequently endorsed / prevalent symptom domains to be identified among the aggregate population of Latinx immigrants.

Results

Hypothesis 1 was null, indicating that the difference in overall mental health among undocumented and documented participants was not significant, $t(227) = .566, p = .241$.

Hypothesis 2 was confirmed, indicating that “Anxiety”, “Depression”, “Sleep Problems”, and “Somatic Symptoms” were most prevalent, in that order, among the entire population sampled. See table 1 below.

Exploratory Analyses:

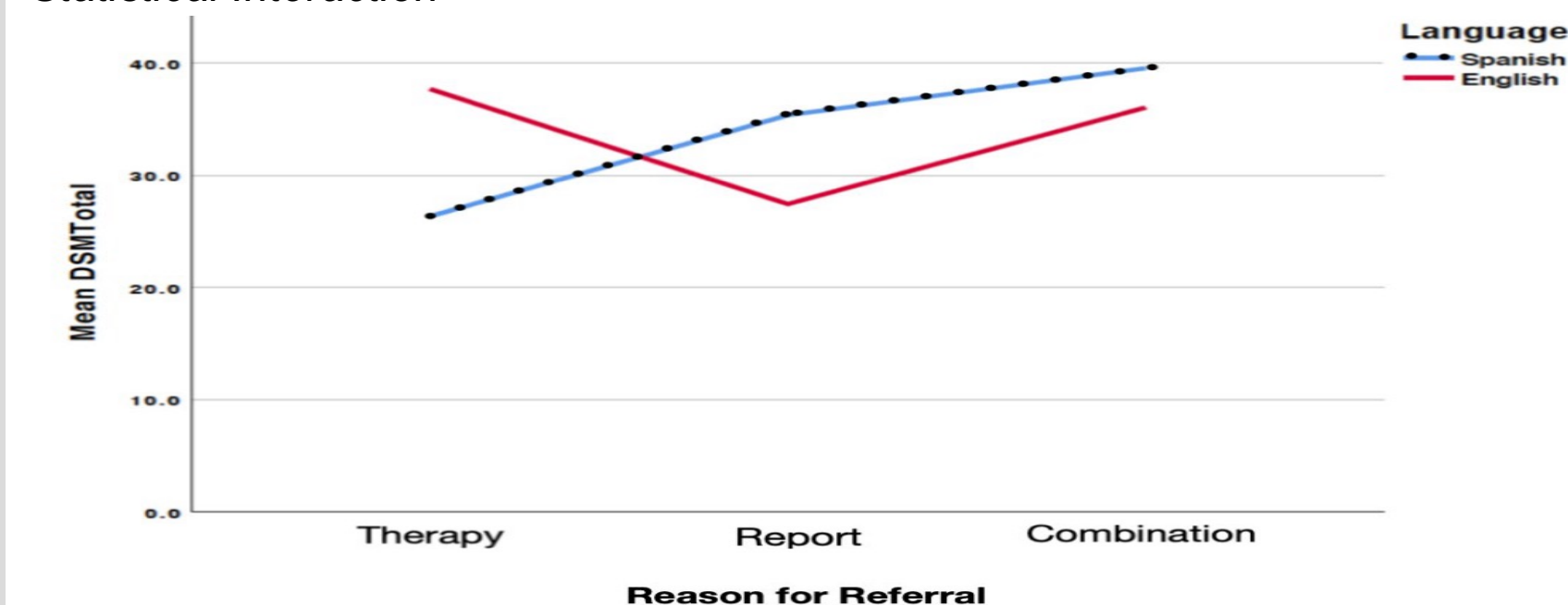
- Those who responded to the DSM-V measure in English reported poorer mental health via higher scores ($n=76, M=35.67, SD=17.93$) than those who responded in Spanish ($n=187, M=30.13, SD=17.21$).
- Participants who obtained a combination of therapy and immigration report ($n=44, M=38.58, SD=19.93$) reported poorer mental health than those who solely obtained therapy services ($n=174, M=29.652, SD=16.31$).
- A statistical interaction $F(2,257) = 6.40, p = .002$ evidenced that English-respondents endorsed poorer mental health when attaining therapy ($n= 51, M=37.69, SD=17.06$), while Spanish-respondents endorsed poorer mental health while attaining an immigration report or combination of services ($n=32, M=39.53, SD=17.21$). See figure 1 below.

Table 1
DSM-V Symptom Domains

Symptom Domain:	Mean	Standard Error	Standard Deviation
Anxiety	3.051	.0646	1.047
Depression	2.521	.0719	1.166
Sleep Problems	2.250	.0880	1.421
Somatic Symptoms	2.180	.0900	1.456
Anger	2.160	.0810	1.319
Mania	2.093	.0848	1.375
Personality Functioning	1.595	.0925	1.499
Repetitive Thoughts & Behaviors	1.490	.0920	1.487
Memory	1.340	.0860	1.402
Dissociation	1.180	.0840	1.358
Psychosis	0.470	.0584	0.947
Suicidal Ideation	0.449	.0607	0.983
Substance Use	0.430	.0590	0.958

Note. N=263

Figure 1
Statistical Interaction



Discussion

Although hypothesis 1 was null, a relationship between legal needs (reason for referral) and acculturation (preferred language) was found as having an influence on Latinx immigrant mental health. Specifically, those who were less acculturated (via Spanish-language preference) attributed more importance/weight to their legal needs than those they consider to be psychological (e.g. lower distress when seeking therapy), rendering them less able to mute or under-report their mental health experience. The finding reaffirms the importance of considering legal needs, acculturation, and their combined influence when assessing a Latinx immigrant’s mental health. Meanwhile, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed as symptom domains of anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms were most prevalent among the population in its entirety. While “Sleep problems” is ranked before “Somatic Symptoms”, it can be encompassed by anxiety and depression as it is included the diagnostic criteria for both domains. Although often excluded or overlooked in psychological assessment, somatic symptoms may be an extension of mental health via a cultural syndrome and a means by which distress may manifest itself for this population (Radan, 2007; Tummala-Narra, 2007; Stoker et al., 1969; Langer, 1965). This finding encourages clinicians to include and consider somatic symptoms when engaging Latinx immigrants in clinical assessment, especially if there is clinical indication/suspicion that they are under-reporting their symptoms via low scores on a measure or present as mildly distressed despite their present circumstance (Garcini, et al 2017).

Conclusions

The study aimed to identify if and how legal status influences mental health among Latinx immigrants and whether symptom domains of anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms were most prevalent among this population to convey that mental health may also manifest somatically. The findings communicate that assessing and understanding the role of legal status and related immigration factors among Latinx mental health is complex and nuanced. The complexities may reside within what is known as the ‘immigrant paradox’, and speculation surrounding the Latinx immigrant’s ability to acknowledge their mental health experience. Additionally, government actions and public policy changes directed towards Latinx immigrants should largely consider the role of legal needs and issues as a health determinant. Special attention to psychosocial and demographic factors that may influence mental health are also encouraged.

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