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The Interplay of Community and Family Risk and Protective Factors on Adjustment in Young
Adult Immigrants

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Abstract

We examined the direct and interactive effects of community violence and both family cohesion and conflict on collective efficacy and aggressive behaviors among immigrant young adults. Participants included 221 young adults (ages 18-26; mean age = 21.36; 45.7% female, 190 born outside the U.S.) who completed self-report measures of their exposure to neighborhood violence, social cohesion, collective efficacy, and prosocial behaviors toward friends and strangers. Results, in general, showed that community violence and family cohesion were positively associated with collective efficacy whereas community violence and family conflict were positively associated with aggressive behaviors. Family cohesion and conflict also moderated the links between community violence and aggressive behaviors. Discussion focuses on the interplay of community and family processes and the relations to adjustment of immigrant young adults.

Keywords: Community violence, family, aggression, collective efficacy

The Interplay of Community and Family Risk and Protective Factors on Adjustment in Young Adult Immigrants

Immigration has garnered worldwide attention as the numbers of people crossing national boundaries has increased dramatically in recent decades. Immigrants include diverse populations, some of whom are displaced for various reasons including natural and climate-related disasters, wars, economic demands, and civil and political unrest (often called forced migration; see Castles, 2003). The number of refugees worldwide has been increasingly more rapidly than in previous decades with an estimated number of 25 million refugees currently, and what is commonly referred to as a global immigrant and refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2013). Because refugee and immigrant populations are sometimes displaced out of need or through force, they experience acute and pervasive cumulative stressors that ultimately shape social functioning (e.g., East, Gahagan, & Al-Delaimy, 2018). These stressors and trauma can contribute to risk and maladjustment for families and youth (East et al., 2018). Importantly, immigrants represent diverse populations and not all are forcibly displaced, as some individuals immigrate by choice for a variety of reasons (e.g., career opportunities, family responsibilities). Economic migration is migration in order to gain access to greater economic benefits (see Castles, 2003). The diverse social experiences of immigrant populations also contribute to the need to study the role of contextual stressors in social outcomes among this specific population.

There are serious immigration-related challenges in the present U.S. sociopolitical climate. Recent political and social rhetoric on federal immigration policies that characterize immigrant populations as criminals and threats to the U.S. has resulted in efforts by the Trump Administration and the federal government to severely restrict immigrant access to the U.S. (see Pierce, 2019). The negative rhetoric and policy efforts have coincided with dramatic increases in

discrimination, racism, and hate crimes in recent years (see Bouza et al., 2018). One recent example is the federal policy that forcibly separated Latino/a children from their parents at the U.S. border (Bouza et al., 2018). These politically driven federal policies, combined with the associated increased militarization of the U.S. border, jointly promote the criminalization of immigrant families and youth (see Pierce, 2019). In order to better understand contextual stressors, as well as risk and protective factors among immigrant populations, the current study examined the associations among community violence and collective efficacy and aggressive behaviors. In addition, we investigated whether family cohesion and family conflict moderated these relations.

Community Violence and Social Outcomes

Considering contextual stressors (e.g., exposure to community violence) and family processes (e.g., family cohesion, family conflict) as correlates of positive social behaviors among immigrant youth is important to better account for adjustment outcomes (Davis & Carlo, 2019). Witnessing community violence might shape young adults' aggressive behaviors because of the need to be assertive or aggressive in return as a survival strategy (McMahon, Felix, Halpert, & Petropoulos, 2009). Individuals in dangerous environments might internalize the need to engage in aggressive behaviors themselves in order to reduce their own vulnerability while often engaging in maladaptive coping strategies (Shahinfar, Kupersmidt, & Matza, 2001). Previous scholars have argued that youth in risky neighborhoods develop social cognitions reflecting a normative view of aggression and a hostile attribution bias regarding others (Shahinfar et al., 2001). These social schemas may contribute to aggressive behaviors among immigrant young adults who are exposed to community violence.

There is empirical evidence among diverse samples of adolescents and young adults that witnessing community violence is positively associated with antisocial behaviors, including aggressive behaviors (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009), and a meta-analysis also found positive links between exposure to community violence and aggressive behaviors among children and adolescents (Fowler et al., 2009). While research with immigrant youth is more limited, there is evidence that exposure to community violence is associated with adverse outcomes, including aggressive behaviors and internalizing symptoms (Hamner, Latzman, & Chan, 2015).

While examining the links between exposure to violence and negative outcomes is important in order to prevent risk, it is also important to examine indicators of positive adjustment in order to avoid contributing to pathology-based models of immigrant youth adjustment. One important indicator of positive social dynamics is perceptions of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is defined as perceived cohesion among community members and a willingness to work toward change and act positively on the behalf of others in the community (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Collective efficacy also refers to community members' willingness to intervene if there is a problem and to work together for the benefit of others (Sampson et al., 1997). Perceiving social networks as high in collective efficacy may be important for immigrant young adults, as establishing social connections and engaging positively with others might be a protective strategy for marginalized youth. Scholars have argued that collective efficacy occurs within social constraints and as a result of structural processes, such as lack of resources and systemic oppression (Sampson et al., 1997). Community violence might negatively impact young adults' perceptions of collective efficacy because youth witnessing or experiencing violence might lack trust in others and might withdraw to avoid future

victimization (Browning, Dietz, & Feinberg, 2004). Alternatively, scholars have also argued that criminal activity and collective efficacy might sometimes function independently, suggesting that there might not always be a direct link between witnessing violence and reduced perceptions of collective efficacy (Browning et al., 2004). Despite the conceptual links in the relations between community violence exposure and collective efficacy, such studies are rare. For example, there is some evidence that community violence and collective efficacy are negatively related (Browning et al., 2004; Sampson et al., 1997). Therefore, we also expected that exposure to community violence would be positively related to aggressive behaviors and negatively related to perceptions of collective efficacy.

Family Cohesion and Social Outcomes

Family cohesion refers to positive relationships and dependability among within the family unit (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Huesmann, & Zelli, 1997). Considering family cohesion in immigrant families might be particularly important because of the salient role of family relationships and social harmony in many collectivistic groups (Georgas et al., 1997).

Theoretically, family cohesion may be negatively associated with aggressive behaviors and positively associated with collective efficacy (Taylor et al., 2016; 2017), as supportive family environments might act as an important protective factor for young adults, including ethnic minority young adults (Georgas et al., 1997).

Previous research has demonstrated the protective role of family cohesion in adolescent and young adults' negative outcomes, including conduct problems, but the links to aggressive behaviors are not consistent, as some studies find significant negative links while others find no significant association (e.g., Hamama & Arazi, 2012). Family cohesion has also been consistently linked to indicators of positive adjustment, including social competence and

prosocial behaviors among diverse samples of adolescents, including immigrant youth (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010). There is also evidence that family cohesion is protective for refugee youth (see Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012), but more research is needed to examine the role of family cohesion in the links between exposure to community violence and social outcomes.

Studies have also examined the moderating role of family cohesion, but results are inconsistent. Some studies have demonstrated that family support buffers the negative links between community violence and aggressive behaviors, but in other studies this moderating effect was not significant (see McDonald & Richmond, 2008). Interestingly, one study with immigrant youth found that the link between community violence and aggression was significant only for youth with highly involved parents. When parents were low in involvement, this link was not significant (Hamner et al., 2015). In order to extend the research on protective factors for immigrant youth, the current study examined family cohesion as a moderator in the links between community violence and young adults' aggressive behaviors and collective efficacy.

Family Conflict and Social Outcomes

Family conflict may be pervasive and can impact all members of the family because of shifts in interpersonal dynamics as a result of conflict, and family conflict might be especially salient among immigrant families because of the stress many families face as they adjust to new environments (Sangalang, Jager, & Harachi, 2017). Because family relationships are primary factors influencing youth and young adults, conflict within the family might erode relationships and put young adults at increased risk for negative outcomes, including poorer mental health and behavioral adjustment (e.g., see Fazel et al., 2012). Therefore, family conflict might be a risk factor for young adults and might negatively predict collective efficacy and positively predict

aggressive behaviors. Additionally, young adults who are experiencing community violence and family conflict might be at highest risk for exhibiting aggressive behaviors and perceptions of low collective efficacy in their communities.

Previous research has demonstrated positive links between family conflict and negative adjustment indices, including internalizing symptoms and aggressive behaviors among youth (Fazel et al., 2012), highlighting the risk associated with experiencing family conflict. These results have been replicated with refugee families (see Fazel et al., 2012). In contrast, however, there is less research examining the links between family conflict and positive perceptions of the community among young adults. Moreover, no studies exist that examine the interactive effects of family conflict and community violence exposure on adjustment outcomes in immigrant young adults.

Study Hypotheses

Based on prior theory and research, we hypothesized that community violence would be positively associated with aggressive behaviors and negatively associated with perceptions of collective efficacy. Family cohesion would be positively associated with perceptions of collective efficacy and negatively associated with aggressive behaviors, and family conflict would be negatively associated with perceptions of collective efficacy and positively associated with aggressive behaviors. We also expected interactive effects such that community violence would be most strongly associated with aggressive behaviors at high levels of family conflict. In contrast, at high levels of family cohesion, community violence would not be as strongly associated with aggressive behaviors, and would be positively associated with perceptions of collective efficacy.

Stress theories suggest that there may be gender differences in responses to stressful events, including exposure to community violence (Taylor et al., 2000). For example, boys are more likely to report witnessing violence and hearing about attacks on others than girls (Berthold, 1999). Boys may also be more likely to respond with a “fight or flight” mentality and engage in aggression when stressed, whereas girls may be more likely to seek out social support from their community and emotional closeness (Taylor et al., 2000). Therefore, we also examined gender differences in the proposed links.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Potential participants were recruited through a number of methods, including hard copy fliers, emails, and snowball sampling. First, hard copy fliers were distributed to residence halls, student areas, and public gathering places at XXXX and the surrounding towns. The flier listed the eligibility criteria, project web site, and the project email was listed on a tear-away tab. Second, research assistants (RAs) reached out to a number of potentially relevant student groups, such as those representing international students and those from ethnic or racial minority backgrounds. Some student groups distributed the flier/email to their members, while others invited the RAs to their meeting to share the research project directly with members. Finally, upon completing the study, participants were encouraged to forward a recruitment email to their friends or others they thought might be interested in participating.

Interested participants contacted a group email that was monitored by the trained RAs. Eligibility criteria were if participants were between 18-30 years old and identified as being a first or second-generation newcomer to the U.S. Participants who completed the initial survey

were sent a \$10 Amazon e-voucher. All questionnaires were completed on-line via Qualtrics. All procedures were approved by the IRB of the XXXX.

The final sample included 221 young adults (ages 18-26; mean age = 21.36; 45.7% female, 190 born outside the U.S.). Participants reported belonging to a variety of ethnic groups [10.4% Black or African American, 45.2% South Asian (e.g., Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi), 25.8% East Asian (e.g., Japanese, Chinese), and 11.8% Latino/a]. Participants reported living in the U.S. from 1 year to 26 years. The majority of participants were born outside the U.S. (78% born outside U.S. and 21% born in U.S.).

Measures

Community Violence. Participants reported on their exposure to violence in the community over the past year (Survey of Exposure to Community Violence; Richters & Saltzman, 1990). The community violence experiences subscale consists of 11 items ($\alpha = .87$). Sample items include, “How many times have you seen someone else get chased by gangs or older kids?” and “How many times have you seen someone else being threatened with serious physical harm?” This scale has been used with diverse youth and has demonstrated good psychometric properties (e.g., Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, & Serafini, 1996).

Family Cohesion and Conflict. Participants completed a measure assessing their perception of their family unit’s cohesion and conflict (Moos & Moos, 1986). Participants rated each item as either 0 = *false* or 1 = *true*. The cohesion subscale consists of 9 items ($\alpha = .80$). A sample item is, “People in my family really help and support one another.” The family conflict subscale consists of 9 items ($\alpha = .74$). A sample item is, “We fight a lot in our family.” The *Family Environment Scale* (FES) has been utilized with a variety of diverse adolescent and

young adult samples, and has consistently demonstrated consistent reliability and validity (e.g., Carpentier et al., 2007).

Aggression. Participants reported on their own physical and verbal aggressive behaviors in the last 7 days (Orpinas & Frankowski, 2001). The scale consists of 9 items ($\alpha = .79$). Sample items include, “I pushed or shoved others,” and “I threatened to hurt or to hit someone.” Participants responded to the prompt, “how many times have you done each of these during the last 7 days?” and rated each item on a scale from 0 to 6 or more. This scale has demonstrated sound psychometric properties in culturally diverse groups of adolescents and young adults (e.g., McMahon & Watts, 2002).

Collective Efficacy. Participants completed a measure of their ethnic group’s collective efficacy in the U.S. (Backer, Kulkarni, & Weinstein, 2007). Participants were asked to reflect on their ethnic group and answer the questions regarding that community. The scale consists of 7 items ($\alpha = .97$), and a sample item includes, “When we get together as a community to express our interests and needs, we can make our leaders pay attention.” Participants responded on a scale from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. Items were reverse-scored, so higher scores reflect stronger collective efficacy. This scale has been used with displaced populations in previous research, and has demonstrated good reliability and validity (e.g., Taylor, 2015).

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were initially conducted on all variables, and variables were correlated as expected (see Table 1). Multiple regression analyses in SPSS were conducted in order to examine links between community violence, family cohesion, family conflict, and two outcomes of interest: collective efficacy and aggression (see Table 2).

Participant age was controlled in all models because of the relatively large age range, and years

in the United States was also included as a control variable in all models because of the range in age of immigration.

The first model included community violence, family cohesion, and the interaction term predicting collective efficacy. Community violence was positively associated with collective efficacy ($\beta = .15, t = 2.11, p = .04$), and family cohesion was positively associated with collective efficacy ($\beta = .23, t = 3.26, p = .001$). The interaction was not associated with collective efficacy ($\beta = -.04, t = -.62, p = .54$). This model accounted for a significant amount of variance in collective efficacy ($R^2 = .15, F(5) = 6.10, p < .001$). In predicting young adults' aggressive behaviors, community violence was positively associated with aggressive behaviors ($\beta = .44, t = 6.71, p < .001$). Family cohesion was not significantly associated with aggressive behaviors ($\beta = -.07, t = -1.09, p = .28$), and the interaction was significantly associated with aggressive behaviors ($\beta = -.23, t = -3.45, p = .001$). The interaction effects were probed by examining the moderator at 1 SD below the mean and 1 SD above the mean in SPSS (see Figures 1a and 1b; Aiken & West, 1991). The results for the interaction between community violence and family cohesion predicting aggressive behaviors demonstrated that both the slope for low cohesion ($\beta = .51; p < .001$) and high cohesion ($\beta = .26; p = .003$) were significant. The findings suggest that for young adults with low family cohesion, aggressive behaviors increased as community violence increased, and for young adults high in family cohesion, aggressive behaviors decreased as community violence increased. This model accounted for a significant amount of variance in aggressive behaviors ($R^2 = .28, F(5) = 13.59, p < .001$).

In the family conflict model predicting collective efficacy, community violence was positively associated with collective efficacy ($\beta = .21, t = 2.64, p = .01$). Family conflict was negatively associated with collective efficacy ($\beta = -.14, t = -1.98, p = .05$), and the interaction

was not associated with collective efficacy ($\beta = -.02, t = -.21, p = .83$). This model accounted for a significant amount of variance in collective efficacy ($R^2 = .12, F(5) = 4.94, p = .001$). In predicting aggressive behaviors, community violence was positively associated with aggression ($\beta = .35, t = 5.04, p < .001$), and family conflict was also positively associated with aggression ($\beta = .15, t = 2.33, p = .02$). The interaction was also positively associated with aggression ($\beta = .26, t = 3.72, p < .001$). The results for the interaction between community violence and family conflict predicting aggressive behaviors for boys demonstrated that the slope for low conflict was not significant ($\beta = .09; p = .49$) and the slope for high conflict was significant ($\beta = .59; p < .001$). These results suggest that at high levels of family conflict, aggressive behaviors increased as community violence increased for boys only. This model accounted for a significant amount of variance in aggressive behaviors ($R^2 = .30, F(5) = 15.03, p < .001$).

We also examined moderation by gender in each model in order to identify potential gender effects. The results demonstrated only one significant interactive effect by gender: the interaction between community violence and family conflict predicting aggression was significant for boys ($\beta = .28; p < .001$) but not girls ($\beta = .01; p = .95$). There were no other significant interactions with gender.

Discussion

In general, the present findings yield evidence that witnessing community violence and family conflict may contribute to young adults' risk for engaging in aggressive behaviors, while a cohesive family unit can act as a protective factor that mitigates young adults from the deleterious consequences of exposure to community violence. Moreover, the joint influence of family cohesion and exposure to community violence was most strongly associated with aggressive tendencies in young adult immigrants. These findings highlight the interplay of

community and family risk and protective factors that relate to social adjustment in immigrant populations. Given the general contentious social and political climate riddled with negative characterizations of immigrant and refugee populations, these findings provide promising avenues for efforts to protect such vulnerable populations.

Family cohesion showed protective effects from exposure to community violence for immigrant young adults. Specifically, for young adults with low family cohesion, aggressive behaviors increased as community violence increased. When young adults live in adverse contexts and are exposed to violence in their communities, positive family relationships may help provide a secure environment and refuge from negative social experiences. This result is consistent with previous research highlighting the buffering role of family cohesion in adolescent and young adults' aggressive behaviors (e.g., Hamama & Arazi, 2012; Taylor et al., 2016). However, the present study extends prior research by demonstrating family cohesion as a source of resiliency for immigrant and refugee young adults experiencing community violence.

In contrast, for young adult men with high family conflict, aggressive behaviors increased as exposure to community violence increased. Because immigrant and refugee populations may already be experiencing contextual and societal stressors at relatively high levels (East et al., 2018), family conflict might contribute to risk because of the chaos and stress associated with negative interactions among family members. Although previous research has demonstrated positive links between family conflict and indicators of externalizing behaviors (Fazel et al., 2012), the current study shows that the links between family conflict and aggression were true for men but not women. This is in line with the notion that men tend to respond to stress with a fight or flight mentality (Taylor et al., 2000).

There were other additional interesting findings. As expected, family conflict was also directly, positively associated with aggressive behaviors and directly, negatively associated with perceptions of collective efficacy. These findings further highlight the negative role that family conflict might have in shaping maladaptive behaviors and contributing to negative perceptions of others among young adult immigrants. However, in contrast to the findings for family conflict, there was a positive link between family cohesion and collective efficacy. These findings were also consistent with prior research (e.g., Leidy et al., 2010) but show that young adults who have positive, supportive relationships within their family unit may positively engage with the broader community (Taylor et al., 2017). It may be that family security provides a base from which young adults can trust others and feel efficacious in creating social progress (see Waters & Cummings, 2000). Alternatively, strong family cohesion might provide supportive coping resources that foster a greater sense of efficacy towards the broader community, and more research is needed to better understand these effects.

Consistent with previous research (Fowler et al., 2009), community violence was also positively linked to aggressive behaviors. The current study adds to the existing evidence by demonstrating the risk associated with witnessing community violence in young adult immigrant and refugee populations. One possibility is that young adults who witness violence in their communities might become relatively more aggressive in return as a way to avoid becoming a victim of others in the community (McMahon et al., 2009). Additionally, it may be that young adults who are exposed to relatively high levels of community violence develop hostile attitudes and biases reflecting a normative view of violence, which might facilitate aggressive tendencies (Shahinfar et al., 2001). Notably, family cohesion was negatively linked to aggressive outcomes in young adult immigrants who were exposed to high levels of community violence. These

findings suggest that exposure to community violence does not always lead to negative behavioral outcomes, especially when young adults have access to high levels of family cohesion. These findings might help explain the prior inconsistent findings on the links between family cohesion and aggressive behaviors.

Interestingly, community violence was positively associated with collective efficacy. It might be that young adults who witness community violence develop a stronger sense of collective efficacy as a means of coping and dealing with such stressors. Conceptual models have suggested that stressors and adversity might not always be negative for young adults, particularly if the stress contributes to empathy toward others in the community (see Davis & Carlo, 2019). There is also empirical support that greater exposure to economic stress is associated with higher levels of helping behaviors among U.S. Latino/a adolescents, which might reflect a greater motivation to integrate with others in their communities (see Davis & Carlo, 2019). Thus, although exposure to community violence and other stressors (e.g., economic stress) might generally be associated with negative outcomes, under some circumstances, such stress might be related to positive outcomes through multiple mechanisms. However, given the novelty of the present findings in the context of a marginalized sample, more research is needed to confirm and better understand these findings.

Study Limitations

There were some study limitations. The study design was not longitudinal (nor experimental), so the direction of effects cannot be firmly established. Future research should utilize multiple methods (including qualitative interviews, multiple reporters, behavioral tasks) to gain a better understanding of the findings and to reduce self-presentational biases. Future research with more rigorous study designs (e.g., prospective longitudinal designs) is also needed

to better discern causality. Additionally, the present sample consisted of U.S. immigrant and refugee adolescents from a variety of countries who were residing in North Carolina (USA). Future research should utilize within-group designs to capture the complexity among immigrant and refugee populations based on multiple factors (e.g., country of origin, race, language diversity), while also examining such populations in a variety of contexts. Finally, the receiving community characteristics and historical experiences of immigrants and refugees might differ depending on where families live in the U.S. and their countries of origin. Therefore, caution in generalizing the findings across the wide range of immigrant and refugee populations in the U.S. and from various countries is warranted.

Conclusions

The current study highlights the interplay of risk and protective factors in predicting adjustment in immigrant and refugee young adults. Understanding contextual risk factors in immigrant young adults is important in order to reduce risk, but focusing on resilience factors is also critical in order to avoid contributing to stereotypes that characterize immigrant populations as aggressive. The present findings yield evidence that promoting family cohesion among immigrant populations is one promising avenue for practitioners and policymakers to support the transition to a new context for young adults. Such promotive efforts that can improve the health and well being of immigrant and refugee populations might also ease the burden on receiving communities, and subsequently improve the quality of life for those communities.

Ethical Compliance Statement

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflicts of interests: None

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Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study.

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Table 1. Bivariate correlations for community violence, family cohesion and conflict, collective efficacy, and aggressive behaviors.

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Community Violence					
2. Family Cohesion	.05				
3. Family Conflict	.14*	-.65*			
4. Collective Efficacy	.18*	.20*	-.08		
5. Aggression	.41*	-.04	.19*	.02	
Mean(SD)	.59(.75)	.73(.28)	.39(.27)	3.94(.80)	.24(.46)

Table 2. Regression results for community violence, family cohesion and conflict, and the interactions between community violence and family processes predicting collective efficacy and aggression.

Family Cohesion Models	Collective Efficacy			Aggressive Behaviors		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Constant	3.68	.52		.44	.26	
Community Violence	.17	.08	.15*	.28	.04	.44*
Family Cohesion	.71	.22	.23*	-.12	.11	-.07
Interactive Effect	-.16	.26	-.04	-.45	.13	-.23*
Family Conflict Models						
Constant	3.76	.53		.35	.26	
Community Violence	.24	.09	.21*	.22	.04	.35*
Family Conflict	-.44	.23	-.14*	.25	.11	.15*
Interactive Effect	-.06	.31	-.02	.56	.15	.26*

Note: * $p < .05$