The Relationship Between Marianismo, Acculturation, and Relational Conflict Styles in Latina College Students

Richard C. Zamora[1], Tammy Lowery Zacchilli[2], and Raul A. De La Cruz[3]

[1]*California State University, Bakersfield*

[2]*Saint Leo University*

[3]*Tennessee Valley Healthcare System*

Abstract

Previous research has focused on acculturation and marianismo. Researchers have explored the role of acculturation in understanding parent-child relationships. However, there has been less attention focused on how acculturation is related to relational conflict styles and how it impacts romantic relationships. We examined the relationship between marianismo, acculturation, and relational conflict styles using a sample of Latina college students (N = 226). The Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS; Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009), Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (SASH; Marin, Sabogal, VanOss, Otero-Sabogal, & Perez-Stable, 1987), and the Guzman Marianismo Inventory (GMI; Guzman, 2011) were used in the current study. We calculated bivariate correlations and a series of multiple regressions using marianismo and acculturation as predictors of six relational conflict styles. Acculturation and marianismo were found to be significant predictors of relational conflict styles. Discussions of results and implications for future research are highlighted.

Keywords: relational conflict, conflict, Latinas, marianismo, acculturation

Understanding relationship dynamics and conflict is an important aspect in improving the well-being of couples and families. Highlighting contributing factors in relational conflict can assist to improve satisfaction and longevity of relational success (Taylor, Seedall, Robinson, & Bradford, 2017). Researchers have studied the relationship between intimate relational success and conflict to further understand relational dynamics (Christensen & Walczynksi, 1997; Cramer, 2004). Researchers studying intimate relationships have examined different variables that are related to relational conflict styles (Cramer, 2004; Holmes & Murray, 1996; Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009). These variables include, but are not limited to, romantic attachment (Feeney & Collins, 2003; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), respect towards partner (Frei & Shaver, 2002; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006), and relationship satisfaction (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Collins & Read, 1990; Gottman & Levenson, 1992).

Presently, few researchers have examined the influence of culture in intimate relationships (Kim-Jo, Benet-Martinez, & Ozer, 2010; Schmitt, 2010). It remains unclear how the influence of culture impacts relationship quality and conflict resolution across various developmental stages (Wheeler, Updegraff, & Thayer, 2010). The purpose of this research is to understand the role of culture (e.g., acculturation and traditional *marianismo*) and relational conflict styles in a sample of Latina undergraduate students. Specifically, the aim of the current study is to examine the role of *marianismo* to understand the relationship satisfaction of Latinas. Findings from the study will provide empirical support and expand the understanding of romantic relationships using a cultural framework.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Richard C. Zamora, Department of Psychology, California State University, Bakersfield, 9001 Stockdale Highway, Bakersfield, CA 93311.

Relational Conflict

Conflict is a pervasive human phenomenon that penetrates all forms of social relationships in all ethnic and cultural groups (Ting-Toomey, Yee-Jung, Shapiro, Garcia, Wright & Oetzel, 2000). Established theories on relational conflict have focused on various approaches. For example, Sillars (1980) theorized three approaches to conflict: integrative, distributive, and avoidant. Another researcher described five strategies in dealing with conflict: separation, compromise, domination, integrative agreement, and structural improvement (Peterson, 1983). Lulofs and Cahn (2000) proposed five strategies in dealing with conflict: accommodation, competition, compromise, collaboration, and avoidance. There are similarities and differences between the suggested approaches (see Zacchilli et al., 2009 for an in-depth comparison).

Researchers have established empirical support in understanding the relationship between relational conflict and relationship satisfaction. Zacchilli et al. (2009) found constructive strategies (e.g., compromise) to be positively related to relationship satisfaction and destructive strategies (e.g., domination and interactional reactivity) to be negatively related to relationship satisfaction. This research was based on a predominately White sample and these constructive and destructive strategies may be different for a diverse ethnocultural group. Understanding the relationship between conflict and relationship satisfaction is important in understanding the experiences of couples and individuals in romantic relationships (Cramer, 2004; Holmes & Murray, 1996).

Latino/a conflict practices emphasize tactfulness and consideration of others' feelings as important norms in interpersonal confrontation situations, which may result in obliging and avoiding conflict styles (Casas & Pytluk, 1995; Garcia, 1996; Padilla, 1981). In addition, conflict styles have been defined as a combination of traits and circumstances (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). An individual's conflict style is learned within the primary socialization process of one's cultural or ethnic group (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). Individuals learn the norms and scripts of appropriate conflict conduct and effective conflict behavior in their ethnic and cultural environment (Ting-Toomey, et al., 2000). In a similar study, Bermudez and Stinson (2011) examined the role of gender and culture in understanding Latino couples' conflict resolution style. Bermudez and Stinson (2011) found that country of origin and language preference showed main and univariate effects in understanding conflict resolution styles.

Researchers have redefined the Marital Conflict Scale (MCS; Gottman, 1994) utilizing Latino Critical Race Theory (Arriola, 1997, 1998; Stefanic, 1998). Five new subscales emerged in understanding conflict resolution styles of Latino couples: united, harmonious, conservative, autonomous, and passionate (Bermudez & Stinson, 2011). Although investigations have queried diverse approaches to understand Latino relationships, the study did not appear to meet all expectations to address how conflict resolution styles relate to marital satisfaction. Bermudez and Stinson (2011) implemented the use of country of origin and language preference as cultural variables in their investigation. Prior investigations have implemented similar variables into research designs (Wheeler, Updegraff, & Thayer, 2010). The lack of empirical evidence and relevant research in this area is problematic in working with Latinas in clinical settings (Bermudez, Reyes, & Wampler, 2006). Findings from the present study will add valuable literature to the academic community to understand the role of culture and its relationship to relational conflict strategies of Latinas.

Traditional Gender Roles and Interpersonal Relationships

Researchers studying gender roles have focused on traditional male and female behaviors. Past researchers have examined different aspects of gender roles, such as gender role conformity (Mahalik et al., 2005), gender role stress (Eisler, 1995), gender role conflict (O'Neil et al., 1986), gender related interests (Lippa, 2005), masculinity ideology (Levant & Fischer, 1998), and femininity ideology (Levant, Richmond, Cook, House, & Aupont, 2007). However, research on female gender roles are limited and there is a lack of research on Latina gender roles. Latino/a gender roles have been associated with specific behaviors and attitudes of these individuals (Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010). Specifically, the term *marianismo* has been defined and constructed based on the female gender roles in the Latin community (Stevens, 1973). Some characteristics that are associated with the term *marianismo* are humble, virtuous, spiritually superior to men, submissive to the demands of men, virginally pure and non-sexual, and willing to make sacrifices and suffering for the sake of family (Castillo et al., 2010; Stevens, 1973). Expanding on the term *marianismo*, Raffaeli and Ontai (2004) suggested that the term *familismo* is an integral part of understanding Latina gender roles. *Familismo* is defined as "an individual's strong identification with and attachment to nuclear and extended families" (Castillo et al., 2010, p. 164).

Studies on conflict within the Latino/a population have focused on parent-child and family relationships (Kuhlberg, Pena, & Zayas, 2010; Piña-Watson, Castillo, Ojeda, & Rodriguez, 2013), and intergenerational and

acculturation conflict (Dennis, Basañez, & Farahmand, 2010). Falconier (2013) examined the effects of traditional gender role orientation and dyadic coping in a sample of first-generation Latino/a couples. Falconier's (2013) findings substantiate that Latino men were more likely to endorse traditional gender role views compared to their female partners. A similar finding in previous research showed that Latino men who endorsed traditional gender roles were less likely to engage supportive and common dyadic functioning (Falconier, 2013). On the contrary, Latina's level of traditional gender role orientation had no effect on their use of dyadic coping. Most significantly, higher levels of traditional gender role orientation were related to decreased relationship satisfaction and increased aggression (Falconier, 2013). However, prior studies have failed to evaluate culturally specific gender constructs such as *marianismo* or *machismo*. The present study examines the role of *marianismo* in understanding conflict strategies and acculturation in a sample of Latina undergraduate students.

It is important to recognize that cultures that value a collective style versus an individualistic style, as well as a cooperative mode versus a competitive mode, may have opposing influences to the dynamics and satisfaction in a relationship (Lynch & Hanson, 2004). Lynch and Hanson (2004) suggested that Latinos/as are very sensitive to interpersonal relations and may use non-verbal communication cues to assess their interaction with others; particularly, in relation to an authority figure or to someone with status. This may differ from those raised in a majority Anglo-European culture, due to diverse influences of cultural values, beliefs, and learning processes (Lynch & Hanson, 2004).

Purpose of Current Study

In the current study, we aimed to provide empirical support and further understanding of the role of culture in relational conflict styles using a Latina undergraduate student sample. Specifically, we explored the relationship between acculturation, marianismo, and relational conflict strategies using the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS; Zacchilli et al., 2009). The research questions were: (1) What are the bivariate relationships between relational conflict strategies, acculturation, and marianismo?, and (2) to what extent does acculturation and marianismo predict relational conflict strategies? Due to the exploratory nature of the study, it was predicted that there would be significant relationships between acculturation, marianismo, and relational conflict strategies and acculturation and marianismo will significantly predict relational conflict strategies.

Method

Participants

A total of 226 self-identified Latinas who were currently in a romantic relationship participated in an online study of relationships, acculturation, and gender roles. Their mean age was 23.71 years old (*SD* = 8.20), with a range of 18 to 63 years of age. The majority of the participants identified themselves as Mexican American (71%, *n* = 239); .6% (*n* = 2) were Spanish Americans; 19.6% (*n* = 66) were Cuban Americans; 1.8% (n = 6) were Puerto Rican Americans; 2.7% (*n* = 9) were South American and .9% (*n* =3) were Central American. Participants also reported their generational status. Ten percent of participants were first generation, 31.7% were second generation, 15% were third generation, 16.7% were fourth generation, and 24.2% were fifth generation.

In terms of relationship status, 79.7% (*n* = 181) were partnered/common law; 18.5% (*n* = 42) were married; 1.2% (*n* = 4) was divorced; and .4% (*n* = 1) were separated. In terms of sexual orientation, 93% (*n* = 211) were heterosexuals, 2.2% (*n* = 5) were lesbians, and 4.4% (*n* = 10) were bisexuals.

Measures

The *RPCS* (Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009) is a 39-item measure with six subscales designed to assess relationship conflict. Participants indicated agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The subscales include Compromise (α = .93, "I negotiate to resolve disagreements"), Avoidance (α = .80, "My partner and I try to avoid disagreements"), Interactional Reactivity (α = .79, "I suffer a lot from conflict with my partner"), Separation (α = .89, "When we have conflict, we separate but expect to deal with it later"), Domination (α = .91, When we argue or fight, I try to win"), and Submission (α = .89, "When we have conflict, I usually give in to my partner"). The purpose of this scale is to measure everyday conflict experienced by individuals in romantic relationships (Zacchilli et al., 2009). Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater use of that conflict strategy.

The *Guzman Marianismo Inventory* (GMI; Guzman, 2011) is an 18-item measure designed to assess the participant's level of endorsement of Traditional Marianismo ($\alpha = .91$, "I put others' needs before my own"), Familismo ($\alpha = .85$, "It is important for me to remain loyal to my family"), and Servant Leadership ($\alpha = .85$, "I am likely to take a stand against injustice"). Servant Leadership refers to Latinas' devotion to righting the injustices in their own communities by utilizing their own privileges (Guzman, 2011). Participants indicated agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 (never true of me) to 5 (always true of me). These three categories are dimensions of marianismo. Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater endorsement of that dimension of marianismo. The Cronbach alpha of the total GMI score was .89.

The *Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics* (SASH; Marin, Sabogal, VanOss, Otero-Sabogal, & Perez-Stable, 1987) is a 12-item measure designed to assess the participant's level of acculturation. Participants indicated agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). High score indicates more acculturation to the host culture. The Cronbach alpha for this sample was .92.

All measures were administered in English.

Procedure

We used purposive sampling as the primary recruitment strategy. The use of snowball sampling allowed for the participation of individuals attending a Hispanic serving institution and private Catholic university located in the Southwest and Southeastern U.S. areas. A research invitation was sent out that instructed interested participants to follow a link that included the recruitment statement, informed consent, and screening form. Completion of the survey was expected to be 20-30 minutes. Approval to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board for both universities was obtained before the study was conducted.

Results

Means and standard deviations were calculated for all of the variables included in the study. This information may be found in Table 1. Correlations were calculated to examine relationships between relational conflict strategies, acculturation, and marianismo and are presented in Table 2.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability for All Variables

		Means	Standard Deviations	Alpha
Romantic Partner Conflict Scale				
	Compromise	4.16	.72	.93
	Avoidance	3.50	1.00	.80
	Domination	2.39	1.09	.91
	Submission	2.47	1.05	.89
	Interactional Reactivity	2.05	.89	.79
	Separation	2.83	1.14	.89
Guzman Marianismo Inventory				
	Traditional Marianismo	2.99	1.04	.91
	Familismo	4.08	.76	.85
	Servant Leadership	3.16	.92	.85
	Total	3.46	.88	.89
Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics		3.76	.75	.92

Table 2

Correlations between Subscales of the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale and the Cultural Variables

	Avoidance	IR	Separation	Domination	Submission	Familismo	Traditional Marianismo	Servant Leadership	Acculturation
Compromise	-.02	-.38**	-.08	-.34**	-.22**	.15*	.03	.21**	.02
Avoidance	—	-.01	.07	-.02	.24**	.13	.24**	.12	.10
IR	—	—	.09	.38**	.41**	.01	.16*	-.05	-.14*
Separation	—	—	—	.17*	.01	-.05	-.04	-.08	-.08
Domination	—	—	—	—	.22**	-.002	.01	-.10	-.08
Submission	—	—	—	—	—	.07	.22**	-.001	-.03
Familismo	—	—	—	—	—	—	.38**	.37**	.13
Traditional Marianismo	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.31**	.38**
Servant Leadership	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.02

Note. IR = Interactional Reactivity.

Cultural Variables Predicting Relational Conflict Strategies

Six simultaneous regression analyses were calculated to examine age, acculturation, traditional marianismo, familismo, and servant leadership as predictors of the six conflict styles. For each analysis, age was entered at Step 1 followed by the other predictors at Step 2. For **b**, the second model was significant, $F (5, 220) = 2.64$, $p = .024$ and accounted for 3.5% of the variance. The only significant predictor was servant leadership ($b = .206$, $t = 2.82$, $p = .005$). For interactional reactivity, the first model was significant, $F (1, 224) = 4.09$, $p = .04$). This model accounted for 1% of the variance. The second model was also significant, $F (5, 220) = 5.47$, $p < .001$ and accounted for 9% of the variance. The significant predictors were age ($b = -.161$, $t = -2.40$, $p = .017$), traditional marianismo ($b = .298$, $t = 3.92$, $p < .001$), and acculturation ($b = -.277$, $t = -3.94$, $p < .001$). For avoidance, the second model was significant, $F (5, 220) = 2.96$, $p = .013$ and accounted for 4.2% of the variance. The only significant predictor was traditional marianismo ($b = .213$, $t = 2.73$, $p = .007$).

For separation, the first model was significant, $F (1, 224) = 12.68$, $p < .001$ and accounted for 4.9% of the variance. The second model was also significant, $F (5, 220) = 3.14$, $p = .009$. The only significant predictor was age ($b = .245$, $t = 3.56$, $p < .001$). For submission, the second model was significant, $F (5, 220) = 3.65$, $p = .003$ and accounted for 5.6% of the variance. Significant predictors included traditional marianismo ($b = .303$, $t = 3.91$, $p = .000$) and acculturation ($b = -.155$, $t = -2.17$, $p = .031$). For domination, the model was not significant.

Discussion

An important step of exploring cultural frameworks to understand relationship conflict strategies is to recognize that cultural values and development differ across cultural groups (Lynch & Hanson, 2004). The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between cultural variables (e.g., acculturation, and marianismo) and relational conflict in a sample of Latina college students. Research in this area has been limited and results of this study relayed valuable and significant findings. The results indicated that only traditional marianismo was significantly and positively correlated with acculturation. The small portion of the literature suggests that traditional gender roles remain consistent and strong over time; therefore, they may not be related to the acculturation process (Santiago-Rivera, 2003). The current finding is worth further exploring. The geographical location of the participants may have contributed to this significant finding, thus this finding may only be unique to the current sample. It would be worth exploring what other factors might explain the relationship between acculturation and traditional gender roles. In addition, the results indicated that the Latinas in this study who endorsed familismo, servant leadership, and

overall marianismo beliefs were also likely to use compromise in their relationships when dealing with conflict. Furthermore, those who endorsed traditional marianismo beliefs were also likely to use avoidance as a conflict strategy. Similar to previous research, it appears that Latinas in this study are keeping the harmony in the relationship and familial values by utilizing compromise and avoidance as a conflict strategy (Falicov, 1998). Using compromise as a strategy may be their way of staying congruent with their cultural values.

Furthermore, we found that Latinas in this study who endorsed less acculturation and less traditional marianismo beliefs were more likely to use interactional reactivity as a way to deal with conflict. It is important to note that what might be viewed as a "destructive strategy" in Western societies, may be a positive cultural characteristic for Latinas (Bermudez, Reyes, & Wampler, 2006). Interactional reactivity may be a way for Latinas to express emotions towards their partner. Findings derive that Latinas may be using different types of strategies to manage varying conflicts in their relationship. For example, in reference to sexual conflict, Latinas are socialized to not discuss sex with other people, which may be viewed as an avoidant strategy to reduce relationship conflict. In reference to a submissive conflict strategy example, men are traditionally viewed as dominant in a relationship and are expected to maintain economic protection of the family (Falconier, 2013; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). We found that Latinas in this study who endorsed traditional marianismo beliefs also endorsed using submission as a conflict strategy. These findings support previous research where Latinas are viewed to be submissive (Castillo et al., 2010; Stevens, 1973).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Self-reported data must always be interpreted with caution due to reporter bias and other limitations. The present study included Latinas who were unmarried, but currently involved in a romantic relationship. Thus, this might be one of the reasons why our findings contradict previous research. This very specific sample also limits the generalizability of the findings. Although males were not examined in the current study, future researchers could examine the role of cultural gender roles in understanding conflict strategies using a sample of Latino men. Additionally, the majority of the research on marianismo is with Mexican Americans, which is similar to the current sample. Therefore, future studies could explore the role of marianismo in relationships in other cultures within the Latin community. Research could examine factors related to conflict strategies for Latino/a couples so compatibility of conflict strategies could be examined. Future studies should also include contextual variables to aid in understanding the relationship satisfaction of these individuals. Future researchers might also include translating the RPCS (Zacchilli, et al., 2009) into Spanish so that a more diverse sample could be examined.

Summary

In conclusion, this study contributes to an understanding of Latinas' approach to relational conflict based on their levels of acculturation and marianismo, but not necessarily to an understanding of their relationship satisfaction. As it relates to Latinas, it is important to assess how cultural beliefs and values affect their relationships. In addition, it would be helpful for clinicians to assess which conflict strategies are used and how cultural values (e.g., traditional marianismo) influence their response to deal with conflict in their romantic relationships. Furthermore, our results indicated that avoidance, submission and interactional reactivity may be strategies used by Latinas in dealing with conflict in their relationships. Such factors are important for clinicians to explore to address how Latina clients manage conflict, while also exploring how congruent these strategies are to their cultural values.

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