

Illuminating Strengths

Dr. Gabriela Livas Stein received 2021's Junior Research Excellence Award for scholarship on impacts of Latinx cultural values, cultural stressors, and mental health care access. A leader in the Latinx child development field, the psychology professor has over 70 peer-reviewed articles and \$5.5 million in funding.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

"I began identifying resilience factors in minoritized communities because much of the existing research focused on deficits. There wasn't much on what I experienced in my life – community processes that promote positive outcomes for kids and families.

"My work has highlighted the protective role of Latinx familism values – loyalty, obligation, respect, support, and identification through one's family network. Familism values support family-based coping and a sense of meaning and predict greater self-esteem and academic achievement and motivation, and fewer depressive symptoms."

CULTURAL STRESSORS

"Discrimination impacts depressive symptomology, self-efficacy, self-esteem, academic motivation, and college-going. It has a long shadow. Discrimination kids experience in fifth grade predicts symptoms to the end of 12th grade.

"I've also studied acculturation gap conflict, where kids and parents acculturate to American values at different speeds. That can lead to family conflict, but it's a unique stressor where we also see differences in attributions. If a parent tells their child, 'Hey, clean your room,' and the child doesn't, in this scenario, they might say, 'My kid is becoming disrespectful,' or the kid might think, 'They're too Latinx – I wish they were like other parents.'

"The gap exacerbates effects of family conflict and predicts depressive symptoms among kids and moms. For kids, it also impacts self-esteem and racial ethnic group pride, reducing protective effects familism might otherwise provide."

THE COSTS OF ACHIEVEMENT

"In Latinx communities, greater risk for depressive symptoms starts in adolescence – they have the highest levels among racial ethnic groups. But we were surprised to find depressive

symptoms weren't associated with decreased academic motivation or grades, differing from what's seen in White, non-Latinx groups.

"The double-edged sword of familism may mean youth struggling with depression, discrimination, and more prioritize family goals over mental health. There's a cost to achievement."

NO MAGIC BULLET

"I'm interested in what can buffer against discrimination, though of course nothing completely erases its effects.

"For example, I've explored shift and persist coping, which is protective for Latinx youth experiencing economic stress. You move away from the stressor cognitively and persist with what provides meaning and optimism. But we found these methods insufficient to protect youth from discrimination's impacts.

"We're testing different factors and putting together pieces that might be useful. Kids need a menu of resilience strategies – shift and persist, familism, strong ethnic racial identity, and so on."

FINDINGS TO IMPACT

"Less than 10% of people with mental health distress in communities of color access support. Our NIH Strong Minds, Strong Communities project tackles that issue by providing culturally responsive care through community health workers – to address not just language barriers, but also those related to trust and stigma.

"Community work is where I draw inspiration. For example, we collaborated with Latinx mental health clinic El Futuro on Padres Efectivos in response to their long waitlist. The program helps families support kids' mental health while waiting for individualized care, and it's being disseminated across the state now.

"More recently, community partners were asking us to talk to families about coping with discrimination, and I was lucky enough to partner with great researchers to develop 'One Talk at a Time' online, to help parents with these conversations.

"I'm proud of my research team and the collaborative environment we've built, where we work with community partners to answer questions that push the field forward."



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Stein holds a piece of traditional Mexican folk art. Since she was a teenager, she has collected suns and moons during her travels.