

Episode 30 - Dr. Paul Smokowski: Acculturation and Adjustment in Latino Adolescents: How Cultural Risk Factors and Assets Influence Adolescent Mental Health

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University of Buffalo School of Social Work is celebrating 75 years of transforming lives and communities. We would like to invite you to be part of the celebration. Please visit our website www.socialwork.buffalo.edu to see a full list of events marking our seventy fifth year leading up to the gala celebration. Welcome to LIVING PROOF. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson. Wait a minute Peter you're Peter Sobota. I'm Adjoa Robinson host of Living Proof. Oh you want me to use my real name. Yes right. OK. Well if you insist. I'm Peter Sobota. Yes this is Peter Sobota clinical assistant professor at the UB School of Social Work and he's our new host. Welcome. Thanks Adjoa it's nice to be joining you. I'm really looking forward to it. I'm Peter Sobota the new host of our podcast series. It's my pleasure to join Adjoa Robinson who is often referred to here simply as The Voice introducing our guests and interviewers. Many people are aware that Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States. Their influence is often mentioned in the news and in our national debates around important issues.

[00:01:49] Currently playing on Broadway in The Heights and West Side Story in addition to other themes are depicting the challenges of immigrant youth attempting to reconcile the conflicting demands of developing a new United States identity and maintaining the ethnic culture that has made them who they are. In this podcast Dr. Paul SMokowski discusses his interest and recent research examining the developmental trajectory of Latino adolescents as they navigate the stressors of immigration acculturation maintenance of cultural identity and managing the expectations of their parents. In of all places North Carolina given that a body of existing research has identified an increased risk of substance abuse youth violence family disruption and high dropout rates for Latino youth. Dr Smokowski is interested in identifying the protective factors that shield these youth from the stress associated with their cultural changes. He describes the surprising things he learned about the critical aspects of acculturation for this population and how external assets protect against not only the at risk behaviors identified in existing research but also the internalized depression and anxiety expressed by many Latino youth. Dr. Paul Smokowski is associate professor at the University of North Carolina School of Social Work in Chapel Hill. We're proud to note that Dr. Smokowski is a graduate of MSW program here at UB. He is currently teaching and conducting research in his appointment as Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina and as a senior health scientist at the National Center for Injury Prevention Control at the United States Center for Disease Control. He has published extensively and has been cited for numerous awards both for his teaching and scholarly work. Give a listen.

[00:03:44] As Adjoa Robinson assistant professor at the UB School of Social Work talks with Dr Smokowski about his recent research and how it challenges traditional and historical assumptions of what is important and successful immigration and integration for Latino youth. I spoke with Dr Smokowski by telephone. Thanks for joining us today. Thank you for having me. Dr Smokowski you are currently principal investigator for the Latino acculturation and health project. How did you become interested in examining the developmental trajectories for Latino adolescents. Ten years ago I moved from Minneapolis down to North Carolina. And as I did that and my research had been on inner city African American adolescence and what factors contributed to their being resilient in

school. When I moved to North Carolina what I found is that during the 1990s North Carolina and other parts of the South was essentially Georgia had been tremendously impacted by a large influx of immigrants primarily from Mexico that ended up attracted to those areas in order to work in that poultry processing plants in the furniture making plant in construction the construction industry that was really booming during that time. I was grounded with issues related to immigration and especially the approach duration and adaptation that happens after immigrant families settle in a new area especially in a new area of the United States. That was not used to having that many or the volume of new immigrants that it was experiencing. That's interesting because a person the average person would just think you're what you're thinking about studying Latinos you'd be in California Arizona Texas someplace like that. But as you mentioned the immigration patterns have shifted and so new places are filling up with a more diverse population. That's exactly right.

[00:05:54] And for my research as well we were interested to see how these new areas are both impacted as well as child adjustment a difference if you are moving to a place where there's very few other Latinos. For example if you move to Los Angeles or if you're Cuban then you move to Miami. You have a critical mass a community where you might even not have to work too hard to be able to trade for example you might be able to conduct your business in Spanish in certain parts of L.A. or New York City. But it's very different in other areas which are experiencing new immigration and in North Carolina the context for immigration was very ambivalent. The immigrants were taking jobs and conducting necessary activity work in the construction industry where they were helping to fuel the economy that was booming in the 90s. However the changes that were coming with that immigration were very very different elements that are very foreign but that would be literally true as well. Very foreign for the small southern communities that word guaranteeing that growth. So what are some of the issues that present themselves as part of the process of acculturation to a new community. What are some of the critical aspects are facing some more what I'd like to do is break that down into really three components the because the acculturation process is a complex dynamic and it has multiple levels which is very interesting to me as a social worker. I say that because we're usually tied acculturation with usually seen as a sociological practice between groups.

[00:07:50] And so it had to do with the contact between independent and autonomous cultural groups and then usually start out as a movement from contact to some type of conflict between those groups which then usually leads to changes or adaptations made often by the powerful or the more or less dominant of the group. And so that's the sociological practice that we see. But what I want to stress is if you take it down to a personal level an individual family level that has more to do about cultural psychology then it's three very important dynamics. One is that a conjugation practice is a two way street and it has to do with the identity or the culture that immigrants bring with them. And I call that you know their culture of origin involvement or identity. Although a large mass of research that might call that ethnic identity. That's one component. The second major component dimension of acculturation is the dominant host or in that case larger U.S. culture and their involvement and identity around that we have two components of acculturation ethnic identity that they bring with them. And then there are new U.S. involvement which cultivates a U.S. identity. Now those two ingredients that can come into conflict and crisis threats when they're getting diverse messages from members of the different cultural groups. So for adolescents a lot of my research focuses on adolescent development. And so when we see those two components what happens is that adolescents can be caught between messages that are from their native culture they are housed in their home especially from their parents and other relatives. Messages that they get when they go to school which in many cases and assimilation it environment meaning that things are run in order for them to adopt the norms and values and beliefs of the dominant or host culture.

[00:10:20] So it maintains an adolescent is stuck between trying to deal with messages that are very different when they're at home and cultural messages that are potentially conflicting in school. For

example do you get stressed so the third element to to finish the three that I want to talk about is acculturation stress. The three things that come up in our research are the importance of ethnic identity or the culture involvement in the culture of origin involvement in the home culture culture and the stress that happens during the adaptation or change from after immigration and that stress can be because of experiencing discrimination. It can be because of having difficulty learning English and also can be from dress or conflict that happens between adolescence and their parents as adolescents adjust to the new he and there is just more slowly. So what couldn't be some of the results of this acculturation stress. How does it manifest and adolescence acculturation stress really stems from the difficulties in adjusting to a new cultural system and so like I like I mentioned some of those qualities that we measure have to do with perceived discrimination or feeling conflict between the messages that you're told feeling like you're caught between the two different cultures. Those components of acculturation stress can be connected to a number of adolescent behaviors for example adolescent substance abuse alcohol and drug use. In our research we also find acculturation stress to be connected to deterioration in family practices such as family cohesion and family.

[00:12:22] The it is really a cultural value that many Latino families have where the family system is thought to be at the heart of one development and so it's priority in your list of responsibilities the family comes first and acculturation. Stress can prompt adolescents to adopt maladaptive coping mechanisms. And when I say that I'm talking about substance use and I'm talking about youth violence or aggressive behavior and and some internalizing problems that are especially acute for females Latina. You're the principal investigator of the Latino acculturation inhealth project. What are some of the questions that you've been addressing with that work. Yes well we've been addressing first of all is how our cultural assets and when I say culture that I mean ethnic identity involvement in one culture of origin and family and again the sense of family being a priority how are those cultural assets and also risk factors such as perceived discrimination and acculturation conflicts. How are those connected to adolescent mental health. That's really at the heart of the study. And so we've looked at that in terms of how those factors predict adolescent externalizing problems which is aggressive behavior and substantive and and internalizing problems which are anxiety and depression. We've looked at those connections. What did you do. How did you conduct your study with a panel study which means that it was longitudinal and we collected data from 300 Latino families. Half of the 300 150 came from North Carolina and half came from Arizona. And we wanted to do that in order to be able to compare the two environments. But also because of the difference in the Latino community there's a great deal of variation or heterogeneity among Latinos in the U.S..

[00:14:46] This is an important factor to think about in the research in North Carolina our community was very young as I said it really mushroomed in the 90s. And so we had very few adolescent Latino adolescents who had been born in the United States in contrast the community in Arizona goes back generations. I'm sure you know and so they had many more adolescents who were born here. And we wanted to make sure we had those captured you know as participants in the sample 150 families came from North Carolina 150 came from Arizona. We collected data in both larger cities like Phoenix or Riley and smaller towns as well as rural areas and that was important because often especially in North Carolina that the Latinos are coming to rural areas to work in poultry processing plants. And we wanted to make sure that we captured that up and they're quite isolated in the small town. So what did you learn. We went to a number of things. One of the things that I have been talking about to a lot of reporters recently is a study that we have put out in the Journal of primary prevention. We recently I was the co editor of a special issue of the journal frontline intervention where we looked at the whole issue was devoted to acculturation and health and Latino and Asian adolescents. And so the study that we just put out there looked at how the acculturation indicators that I've been talking about are connected to multiple areas of adolescent functioning. One of the very interesting things about that article is that our research has been

focusing on how these acculturation dynamics especially you know your ethnic identity and your U.S. identity how those come together into a bi cultural adaptation.

[00:16:58] So we've been looking at biculturalism and this study has some interesting things to say about finding about biculturalism Well first of all what we've found is that adolescent ethnic or cultural origin identity were a cultural asset. We would also call that a protective factor and throw one thing in particular adolescents who had a higher level of involvement in their culture of origin. When we followed them up one year later we found that those higher levels were predictive higher levels of self-esteem. He was also connected to lower levels of hopelessness lower levels of social problems and what aggressive behavior. Now that was a longitudinal study. The nice part is that we were able to look at how the beginning levels of cultural identity are connected to adolescent mental health later on. It's not just the snapshot but a stronger prediction because it's more than one point in time. So biculturalism is a protective factor. Yes. And so what we've found the crash site study is that the interesting part is that biculturalism again come together from two different components. Your involvement in your ethnic culture and your involvement in the overall U.S. culture and because it's made up of those two components those components sort of drive the overall protective functioning of biculturalism for different reasons. OK so let me be specific. The Atterton sense of involvement in their culture of origin is connected to higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of aggressive behavior. But now when you talk about anxiety and depression. Another important and different area at the bottom functioning. It is into their culture of origin involvement.

[00:19:18] It's the first time that those adolescents who are more involved in their the U.S. culture tend to see a lot of practice and have less anxiety. What we found in that study is also that this sense of ethnic identity is not that important for immigrant had a weapon. In fact it's even more salient for Latino adolescents who are born in the United States. That's one of the differences you found between the adolescents in Arizona and North Carolina. What are the similarities. Well what I'm saying is across all of the other things in both North Carolina and Arizona their involvement in their culture of origin was important for all of them. That it's particularly important we don't adolescents who are born in the United States and now in our study those adolescents tended to live in Arizona. That is interesting the case those adolescents you can imagine they've grown up here in the United States. They're most likely to be much more stimulated. So without that overt involvement in the US culture is not a big issue. They probably have a great deal of involvement. They have a great deal of involvement because they tell us in the culture that they can slow down and really try and connect to their culture of origin then that has a useful effect for their mental health. What do you think is going on there. Why do you think that's the case. When we talk about biculturalism it's often bringing together apathy. OK.

[00:21:02] You can see in terms of these different dimensions and so you get that strength from being able to go between the important part of that that I'm with this study is that we're now working to in the way are often connected to their culture of origin courting variability but they tend to be less connected. They don't have memories from growing up in Mexico for example. And so the point of this is that if they can spend time to get more connected it benefits them in that they're able to bring together the positive aspects that both cultural. And I think that's where we find in our qualitative research which compliments our quantitative study that we are able to bring following leads from both the cultural systems together which ones work that for them and are the healthier and then go between as is needed in their environment. Do you think about that what's happening here is that bicultural adolescents tend to be able to access resources adopting different norms based on the situation and have probably you know double or maybe even more out of the social support network because they can access very different clustering of that UI and Latino peers. It really very useful thing to be able to do for adolescent development. Do you think the adoption of biculturalism and the benefits of it is something that's been true over time or is beneficial particularly because of the confluence of factors at this point in time because for a long time in this country adopting

biculturalism wasn't the way assimilation was the approach. We have a whole generation of folks who once their parents came here they never taught them the native language and it was sort of I'm an American now. Everything is focused on us US culture yet and that that's that ideological tension that has been salient in this area of research but also within the societal dynamic that we've had.

[00:23:35] And what you described with this simulation is a dominant perspective that was most salient to the first three quarters of the 20th century. And the thing is that in a hundred years ago we had a large wave of immigrants but they were all predominantly from Eastern Europe and some parts of northern and western Europe but most of Eastern Europe felt we were worried at that a hundred years ago we were worried about how Caucasian Russian Catholics would get along with the Caucasian Russian Jewish immigrant or we were worried about how the Irish Catholic would get along with the Anglo-Saxon immigrants prior immigrants from England and those are important issues. But what was quite effective with the assimilation perspective there had to do with a generational movement with intermarriage between the other groups meaning in between the dominant group and the other groups. And so that quite effective so far. But they often ended up eating the same language in my getting feeling American and current research also shows that over generations there is still that movement toward the dominant culture. That are very large wave of immigrants. Now it helps them different with has some different twists. because they're more distinct than prior way more distinct in that the skin tone of immigrants from Latin America Central and South America is different. And that can change and they tend to be bringing cultural norms and behaviors that are more sharply distinct from the dominant Anglo-Saxon ones. And they the assimilation process than has them new with but that being said this practice has become more complicated because they tend to be holding onto their culture of origin more closely in terms of keeping their roots.

[00:26:02] And so there is a much more of a movement now than historically with towards maintaining a biculturalism rather than simple assimilation both in terms of the tired old trend that movement toward pluralism or multiculturalism really that changed in the 60s with the civil rights movement the sense of how immigrants should be in the country really changed with the Sixties movement. Since then there's been much more of attitude toward maintaining an ethnic identity and of course dealing with the overall society. And you do have a movement toward biculturalism this year we've had some landmark examples of that in terms of the election of Barack Obama for example Carol that him being the first African-American president which of course is true. But at the same time he was raised in Hawaii and in Indonesia. And he clearly is also the first bicultural president that we've had also with Tony Harris she's the first bicultural Supreme Court justice. So my point is that you can be in 2009 movement towards biculturalism which is really unprecedented. You know for the country and give him that. Do you see any social cultural or political challenges to promoting biculturalism among Latino youth. Sure there are important challenges. There's always a backlash which there continues to be. And so one of the issues has to do with discrimination for example where especially in the early stages of biculturalism there can be that faith where a weapon or older adults as well feel like they're not quite integrated in either system. Some researchers call that culture of homelessness. So you don't quite feel exactly welcome or at home in either system.

[00:28:27] And the important part of that is in our work we're trying to trace the developmental cord or biculturalism and that tends to happen in the earlier stages before by cultural identity as well integrated but most adolescents move through that feeling of culture to be able to navigate between comfortably and feel like they can integrate that to them. And so with that we have to find that identity has become much more multicasted and had more integrated and more fluid. So it's less stressful for the individual to have to navigate between your question without having to do with the tidal dynamic. And of course there is a very strong movement to make sure I get a nativist movement which is always a backlash toward you know they should become American and

assimilation pressure tends to be bottled up and then come out at different times in the path of the traffic. So it is not at all easy process. But our research shows that it's one that is invested in by adolescents and their parents. It can really be helpful in terms of their mental health once they develop. So what would you say to practitioners working with social work practitioners working with Latino families given what you found in your research. There's a few critical points for practitioners who are working with the family especially in new immigrant families. One is that a key ingredient in inculturation strength has to do with conflicts that happened to between parents and their adolescence. Adolescents tend to cultivate much quicker than their parents. We talked about this in the research community in the 1980s and so that conflict that can happen in my research we've been able to link that to a number of adolescent behaviors. Higher levels of adolescent aggression higher levels of depression and substance use.

[00:30:50] So what you want to do as a practitioner is try and help the adolescent and parents come to a more amicable communication. And I don't mean that they always agree. I mean what need to do is talk about the changes that are happening to both both the adolescent and the parent and be able to work through some of the anxiety that is causing the stress. Now on the parents perspective what happens is they are very worried about their adolescent becoming too Americanized and what parents think about when they say Americanized things that they don't want their adolescence to become too liberal or to take you know for example they think that our American adolescents take drugs are too wild and so even though that may not at all be true. This is how the fear that many immigrant parents have and so in response to that fear they try and restrict their adolescent to cut down the amount of time or exposure they have. The let them get angry because of that they can't talk to their friends or you know they feel like they're stuck in their bedrooms. For example the study which happens quite a bit. And so what we're trying to do we have developed a program called Andrei Dortmund and between two worlds in English and so that program brings multiple family groups together of these immigrant families. And each week we address a theme that related to acculturation. So for example right in line with our discussion parent child conflict is what we go through. One week we target another week about how to deal with the school system how to deal with discrimination.

[00:32:53] And each week we use a lot of role playing and structured activity in order to try and help them develop new skills for dealing with the issue. So for example with discrimination and 11000 experienced discrimination and the and school predominantly on the back is what we've found. And so how do you respond to those instances when a group of African-American or white adolescent is telling you you know you don't belong here go back to the country. How do you respond. And so we have that we had that kind of situation and we have them role play different different responses to that they might be able to explore and think about what would be the best way to deal with that kind of track. The real important thing that we're bringing multiple family get together that also increases their social networks. It also led parents you know gave advice or ideas to other cancer as well as take adolescents from other families and to the way that they choose to do that. And I imagine it also normalizes the situation and I'm not the only family right. That's true. Are there other families are going through them. And one of the things that is really important is that in the strength of acculturation many parents and adolescents don't go home and say let's talk we need look at what we're going through. They actually when they're home they want to be. They want to have a little respite from that stress and so they don't talk about the practice which is what we want to try and give them an outlet to be able to talk with each other about it and get support for the stress that they're going through.

[00:34:52] We have empirically tested this program in a longitudinal randomized clinical trial and we found that those who participated in centroid or Mundo compared to support group parents from ETM groups reported that their adolescents were erratic reactive had better had like parent child conflict were oppositional and defiant and had lower levels of total Proudman. One year after the

program ended. And so there was a sustained benefit that we think was really from the participation and the skills that they were able to develop in the program for adapting to the new cultural system. That's great. So what's next. What are your next steps. Well one of the things that we would like to see the same models of adaptation is biculturalism as a cultural asset. Parent child act as a factor if these research findings are much more common to Latino groups we would like to be able to see if they hold up with other types of immigrant and minority groups. So for example we'd like to test out Asian immigrants have the same types of problems and accept. We'd like to see if Native American adolescents also have the same practices for becoming bicultural of course. There they are having to balance you know native culture beliefs as well go off into the larger society as well. And so we would like to see if this generalizes if you will group out there we would like to be able to follow adolescents for longer and this was a three year study where we followed them every six months.

[00:36:53] We would like to have a longer time to be able to see really how their adjustment and and their cultural identities really come to fruition in young adulthood. Any final words for our audience our research. I'm writing a book now by cultural development and I think that that is one of the key. What we tend to see in both adolescence and parents that if they can do the opposite integrate the opposite of what come more easily for them. So parents we also found in the same study I talked about with the Journal of primary prevention that parents who were more involved in the youth culture that their adolescence displayed less anxiety less aggressive behavior and fewer social problems. So these immigrant parents we would like to try and get them to be flexible enough to be involved in in the U.S. culture. Adolescents on the other hand quickly become involved and we want to keep them connected to their culture of origin and their ethnic identity and being able to balance between the two has benefits for socially. It has benefits from the book that I'm writing has benefits in terms of the neurons in the brain and it has benefits for cultural dynamics both as a society as the world becomes more global society so it really is a cultural asset that goes all the way from neurons to nation. And I think that that is going to be an increasingly important dynamic as immigrant and at the world and cope with the process. But after we see that dramatically changing ethnic mosaic that's happening in the United States. And it will become even more acute as the very young Latino population continues to grow in 21st century. Wow that's very very interesting. Sounds like you got a lot of work to do.

[00:39:05] Dr. Paul Smokowski thanks for joining us on living proof today. Thank you. You've been listening to Dr. Paul Smokowski discuss the protective factors involved for Latino youth as they integrate into U.S. culture. We hope you enjoyed our podcast and that you'll join us for more interesting conversations about social work practice and research on living proof. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community with more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.