

# Ability to navigate between cultures is good for Mexican-American youth

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Approximately 40 million foreign-born persons, representing about 13 percent of the population live in the United States. Many Latino immigrants find it best to maintain their cultures and identities while acclimating to mainstream American culture, thereby becoming bicultural. New research from the University of Missouri points to biculturalism as an indicator of positive self-evaluation and prosocial tendencies, such as empathy towards others, for Mexican-American youth.

"Regardless of the nationality of a parent, one thing remains constant—parents want their children to have prosocial tendencies," said Gustavo Carlo, Millsap Professor of Diversity in MU's College of Human Environmental Sciences. "Parents want their kids to have self-esteem, to care for others and be confident: traits that lead to relatively high levels of well-being. This is particularly true for Latino immigrants working to make a better life for their children in the U.S."

Carlo says that for Latino youth in the U.S., biculturalism allows them to stay connected with both their culture of origin and the culture of their communities. Through his research, Carlo found that those with higher biculturalism scores had greater prosocial tendencies and positive self-evaluation. Moreover, he found that prosocial actions, such as caring for others and helping those in need, promote a better self-concept making it easier to maintain connection with one's culture of origin.

To study the impacts that biculturalism has on Latino youth, Carlo

focused on the predicted positive associations biculturalism would have on positive self-evaluations and whether prosocial tendencies increase as biculturalism increases. Carlo surveyed 574 U.S. Mexican adolescents living in the greater Phoenix area. The survey consisted of questions related to ethnicity, language spoken at home, willingness to help others and self-esteem.

"We found that adolescents who can adopt both their culture of heritage and mainstream culture and those who can navigate between the two worlds are more likely to be confident, have higher self-esteem and help others," Carlo said. "However, not all adolescents have the luxury to navigate both worlds. For example, one may want to fit in with their peers but, for a variety of reasons, is unable to do so. Then the next best alternative is to remain connected with one's culture of origin to improve overall well-being."

To help Latino youth navigate between cultures, parents and teachers can play roles, Carlo said. He suggests that parents be open to their children's entering and adopting mainstream [culture](#) as well as teachers' supporting programs that promote inclusion and diversity.

*The Journal of Latina/o Psychology* will publish the study, "The Associations of Biculturalism to Prosocial Tendencies and Positive Self-Evaluations," this spring. The research was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (MH068920). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of either funding agencies. Camille Basilio and George Knight from Arizona State University co-authored the study. Carlo's book, "Prosocial Development: A Multidimensional Approach," was recently published by Oxford University Press and received an award from the American Educational Research Association.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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