

Bilingual immigrants report better health than speakers of one language

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Healthy individuals who immigrate to the U.S. often see their health decline over time. A recent study from Stanford University suggests that immigrants who learn English while maintaining their native language might be protected against this puzzling phenomenon.

Ariela Schachter, a Ph.D. student in sociology, examined the [correlation](#) between English and [native-language](#) proficiency and Asian and [Latino immigrants'](#) self-reported health status. The results, published in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, showed that people who are proficient at both English and their native language report better health than do speakers of just one language.

“There is a lot of debate about whether we should be encouraging or

forcing people to just speak English,” Schachter said. “Sometimes I think that debate ignores the positive things that people can get from maintaining a strong ethnic culture and identity, and part of that identity is a native language.”

Schachter and her colleagues used data from the 2002-2003 National Latino and Asian American Study, which asked questions about language use and self-rated health in addition to asking about respondents’ everyday experiences. The researchers constructed mathematical models to try to explain the health effect of bilingualism.

Surprisingly, the study found that the positive effects of bilingualism could not be simply attributed to more family or social support or less stress or discrimination. Socio-economic status helped to explain only some of the effects of bilingualism on health status for Latinos, while family closeness and communication explained some of the effects for Asians.

“What we found out is we need to do more to find out what drives this,” Schachter said.

The explanation of why bilingualism translates to better health is still puzzling and unexplained, said Ellen Bialystok, Ph.D., a psychology professor at York University in Toronto. “It’s possible that education and socio-economic status are the true underlying cause of the immigrants’ better health and not their language status.”

“Is it simply that immigrants who are more successful in learning English are more successful in many things, and success offers better access to health care?” Bialystok asked.

More information: Schachter, A., et al. Language proficiency and health status: Are bilingual immigrants healthier? *Journal of Health and*

Social Behavior. Online, 2012.

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