Explaining the Alcohol Immigrant Paradox: Perspectives from Mexican American Adults

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Abstract

Native-born Latinx Americans are at greater risk for alcohol use and misuse than their foreign-born peers (i.e., the alcohol immigrant paradox). To understand this phenomenon, we conducted a qualitative study with Mexican American adults in the community to explore their perspectives on reasons that may explain the alcohol immigrant paradox. Community adults from the Southwest United States were recruited to participate in the present focus group study ($N = 32$, $M_{age} = 32.8$, 63.0% women). Participants shared their observations, beliefs, and lived experiences regarding alcohol use and misuse during in-person semi-structured interviews. Using a combination of grounded theory and consensual qualitative research approaches, we identified three key themes that illuminated Mexican Americans' perspectives regarding factors that may underlie the immigrant paradox in alcohol involvement: (1) exposure to risks in the U.S., (2) loss of Mexican values that are protective against alcohol misuse, and (3) deterrents specific to immigrants. Participants' perceptions for reasons that explain nativity differences in alcohol use were consistent with erosion theory. To the effect of considering negative drinking-related social consequences, participants indicated that this nativity difference also may explain the immigrant paradox in alcohol involvement. This type of immigrant-specific deterrents to engaging in (hazardous) drinking is not currently represented in the literature. New knowledge gleaned from Mexican Americans' perspectives can inform future research that examines the possible mechanisms and moderating conditions that underlie the alcohol immigrant paradox.

Keywords: acculturation, Hispanic, migration, qualitative inquiry, socialization

Spanish Abstract

Los latinxamericanos nacidos en los Estados Unidos corren un mayor riesgo de consumo y abuso de alcohol que sus compatriotas nacidos en el extranjero (i.e., la paradoja de inmigrantes en el

uso de alcohol). Para comprender este fenómeno, realizamos un estudio cualitativo con adultos mexicoamericanos de la comunidad para explorar sus perspectivas sobre las razones que pueden explicar la paradoja de inmigrantes en el uso de alcohol. Adultos de una comunidad en el suroeste de los Estados Unidos fueron reclutados para participar en esta investigación de grupo focal ($N = 32$, $M_{edad} = 32.8$, 63.0% mujeres). Durante entrevistas semi-estructuradas en persona, los participantes compartieron sus observaciones, creencias y experiencias relacionadas con el uso y abuso del alcohol. Mediante una combinación de teoría fundamentada y enfoques de investigación cualitativos consensuales, identificamos tres temas clave que iluminan las perspectivas mexicoamericanas sobre los factores subyacentes de la paradoja de inmigrantes en el uso de alcohol: (1) exposición a riesgos en los EE.UU., (2) pérdida de valores mexicanos que protegen contra el abuso del alcohol, y (3) elementos disuasivos específicos para inmigrantes. Las perspectivas de los participantes sobre las razones de las diferencias de natividad en el uso de alcohol son consistentes con la teoría de la erosión. Al considerar las consecuencias sociales negativas relacionadas con el uso de alcohol, los participantes indicaron que esta diferencia en natividad también puede explicar la paradoja de inmigrantes en el uso de alcohol. Este tipo de elementos disuasivos específicos para inmigrantes en el uso (peligroso) del alcohol actualmente no están representados en la literatura. Este nuevo conocimiento obtenido de las perspectivas de los mexicoamericanos puede informar futuras investigaciones que examinen los mecanismos y las condiciones moderadoras subyacentes de la paradoja de inmigrantes en el uso de alcohol.

Public Significance Statement

Differences in health outcomes across ethnicity and nativity status are critical public health concerns. According to community participants, relatively higher levels of alcohol use and misuse by U.S.-born Mexican Americans compared to their Mexico-born counterparts may be

results of greater exposure to risky drinking environments and stresses in the United States, a loss of ethnic heritage values that protect against hazardous drinking, and social deterrents that are specific to immigrants. Future studies that focus on these factors have the potential to enhance culturally responsive case conceptualization and service delivery.

Explaining the Alcohol Immigrant Paradox: Perspectives from Mexican American Adults

Latinx Americans make up the largest and second fastest-growing ethnic minority group in the United States. Close to 20% of the U.S. population identify as Latinx/Hispanic Americans (Census Bureau, 2017), and over one-third of the Latinx population are born outside of the U.S. (Flores et al., 2017). Coupled with this rapid growth, there is a critical public health concern around alcohol use and misuse among Latinx American individuals. Although less likely than Euro Americans to report past-month alcohol use, Latinx Americans report high levels of binge drinking and heavy episodic drinking; approximately a quarter of this population are diagnosed with an alcohol use disorder in their lifetime (SAMHSA, 2017; Vaeth et al., 2017). Compared to other Latinx ethnic subgroups, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans consume more alcohol, and are more likely to engage in binge drinking and meet DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse and dependence (Vaeth et al., 2017). Despite sociopolitical and economic challenges commonly experienced by immigrants, foreign-born Latinx Americans consistently show lower levels of alcohol (mis)use and other health problems than their U.S.-born counterparts (Velasco-Mondragon et al., 2016).

These observed nativity differences have been referred to as the immigrant paradox. Although healthy immigrant hypothesis and erosion theory have been referenced in research that examined factors that could explain nativity differences in alcohol involvement and other health outcomes (see Teruya & Bazargan-Hejazi, 2013 for review), it is unclear how people of Latinx backgrounds think about the possible reasons that underlie the alcohol immigrant paradox based on their lived experiences. Given that Mexican Americans make up the largest Latinx ethnic group (Census Bureau, 2017) and are at high risk for alcohol misuse, we focused on Mexican Americans in the present study. We aimed to explore reasons that Mexican Americans attribute

to the immigrant paradox in alcohol involvement. Using a combination of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and consensual qualitative research approaches (Hill et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997), we conducted focus group interviews with Mexican American community adults to gather their insights.

Immigrant Paradox

Nativity differences in health outcomes and problem behaviors (e.g., alcohol use, obesity, criminality; Ruiz et al., 2013; Shor et al., 2017) are considered paradoxical because of immigrants' "unexpected success in the face of adversity" (Fuligni, 2012, p. 299). Countries where many Latinx immigrants originate tend to provide poorer access to health-promoting resources relative to the U.S.; Latinx immigrants also tend to have lower levels of English proficiency to pursue high-paying jobs relative to their U.S.-born counterparts (Bacio et al., 2013; Horevitz & Organista, 2013; Shor et al., 2017). Additionally, some foreign-born Latinx Americans have been exposed to trauma and stress before and/or during migration. By contrast, relative to their immigrant peers, U.S.-born Latinx Americans typically are more fluent in English and more immersed in the mainstream society, enjoy higher socioeconomic statuses, and are more familiar with the local healthcare system and resources, which all tend to facilitate more favorable health outcomes. Nevertheless, recently immigrated Latinx tend to show health advantages over their native-born, same-heritage counterparts, other immigrants who have spent more time in the host culture, and/or their Euro American counterparts (Teruya & Bazargan-Hejazi, 2013).

Immigrant Paradox of Alcohol Use among Latinx Americans

Nativity differences have been observed among Latinx Americans across a range of alcohol use outcomes, although a small number of studies have shown results that are

inconsistent with the immigrant paradox. A study with family-linked Mexican Americans showed that alcohol was consumed with increased frequency and quantity over generations of being in the U.S. (Markides et al., 1988). Among adults in college and the general community, foreign-born individuals were more likely to abstain from alcohol, and were less likely to binge drink and experience negative drinking-related consequences (Greene & Maggs, 2018; Li & Wen, 2015; Reingle et al., 2014). Furthermore, evidence showed more dramatic generational increases in alcohol use among Mexican American women who have greater socioeconomic status than people in other segments of the Latinx population (Gilbert, 1991). By contrast, other results indicated a steep decline in drinking quantity among men during the first year of their immigration and no change in the trajectory of drinking quantity among women (e.g., Sanchez et al., 2014). A body of longitudinal research showed a steady generational increase in underage alcohol use, drinking frequency and volume, binge drinking, frequency of intoxication, overall hazardous drinking, and drinking-related problems among Latinx adolescents (Alamilla et al., 2020; Bacio et al., 2013; Eitle et al., 2009; Gil et al., 2000; Maldonado-Molina et al., 2011).

To the extent that between- and within-sample heterogeneity was present concerning nativity differences in alcohol involvement, research has examined a range of correlates that may underlie the alcohol immigrant paradox. People who immigrated to the U.S. at a younger age and lived in the country for longer duration showed patterns of alcohol involvement similar to their native-born counterparts (Li & Wen, 2015; Reingle et al., 2014; Salas-Wright et al., 2014). Acculturation-related factors, including language preferences, ethnic affiliations, cultural values, and acculturative stress had been shown to be linked to the alcohol immigrant paradox (e.g., Alamilla et al., 2020; Eitle et al., 2009; Gil et al., 2000; see Lui & Zamboanga, 2018b for review). Other findings indicated that peers' substance use, family cohesion, parental

involvement, and personal valuation of the negative drinking-related consequences accounted for nativity differences in alcohol use outcomes among Latinx youth (Bacio & Ray, 2016; Maldonado-Molina et al., 2011; Salas-Wright et al., 2016). The state of the science highlighted the importance of exploring the roles of individual and subgroup characteristics and experiences to better understand the nativity differences in alcohol involvement.

Theoretical Frameworks of Immigrant Paradox

Two main theoretical frameworks have guided research on the immigrant paradox. Whereas there are similarities across these existing theoretical frameworks in contextualizing nativity differences in various health conditions, relative strength of the immigrant paradox differs across health behaviors and ethnicity (Teruya & Bazargan-Hejazi, 2013). Hence, our literature review of these theories and empirical research focused on the alcohol immigrant paradox, and on Mexican or pan-Latinx Americans.

The immigrant paradox in alcohol involvement has been examined in the context of acculturation. Acculturation is a process that occurs when individuals come into contact with a new culture, and typically involves behavioral, psychological, and social changes at the individual level (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). How people adapt to the changing cultural contexts have been measured in terms of their immersion in—and identification with—the mainstream U.S. society and their ethnic heritage society (e.g., Mexican culture; Lui & Zamboanga, 2018b; Stephenson, 2000). These cultural orientations likely are broadband markers for specific advantages and assets that are common in immigrants and/or vulnerability factors that are common in U.S.-born individuals. Acculturation also may be markers for other more refined socialization and/or stress processes that directly affect alcohol use outcomes (Lazarus, 1997; Pham & Lui, 2019; Teruya & Bazargan-Hejazi, 2013).

Healthy Immigrant Hypothesis

One of the key theoretical conceptualizations of the immigrant paradox has to do with the notion that healthier individuals are more likely to migrate to a new society and remain there (Abraido-Lanza et al., 1999). For example, research showed that foreign-born Mexican Americans who migrated to and stayed in the U.S. were taller, attained higher levels of formal education, and had better childhood health than their counterparts who returned to Mexico (Crimmins et al., 2005). For some health outcomes such as activity limitation, scholars have referred to the healthy immigrant hypothesis as a “salmon bias” as well, suggesting that Mexican Americans who struggle with poor health and other social disadvantages return to Mexico (Bostean, 2013). Hence, healthy immigrant hypothesis suggests that a selective migration inflates the health profiles of Mexico-born Mexican Americans and therefore creates the illusion of an immigrant paradox.

Erosion Theory

Another key theoretical conceptualization of the immigrant paradox postulates that there is a generational decline in ethnic heritage practices and cultural values that protect individuals from alcohol misuse. According to erosion theory, protective features of the Latinx culture (e.g., familism and ethnic pride) deteriorate over time and across immigration generations. Among Latinx adolescents, higher levels of family connectedness and parental involvement were shown to be associated with lower levels of peer substance use and greater school connectedness, which in turn predicted lower levels of substance use (Prado et al., 2009). Specifically, decline in *familismo* likely meant a reduction in parental monitoring of risky behaviors including alcohol use among adolescents across immigration generations (Bacio et al., 2013; Gil et al., 2000). There were similar patterns observed among Mexican American college students (Strunin et al.,

2015). Consistent with erosion theory, research suggested that U.S.-born Mexican Americans and other Latinx emerging adults lost the protection of ethnic pride and identification, and therefore became more inclined to use alcohol as a means to alleviate stress (Castro et al., 2009).

The Present Study

Although there has been research examining factors that might account for nativity differences in alcohol use outcomes, little is known about Mexican American individuals' perceptions about the alcohol immigrant paradox based on their lived experiences. Thus, the purpose of the present qualitative study was to gain insights of the observations, beliefs, and experiences of Mexican Americans as they pertained to immigration and alcohol use. Using a combination of grounded theory and consensual qualitative research approaches, we conducted focus groups with foreign- and U.S.-born Mexican American adults from the community to explore their perspectives on and phenomenological understanding of the alcohol immigrant paradox. Because nativity differences were observed across multiple indicators of alcohol involvement (e.g., Bacio et al., 2013; Salas-Wright et al., 2014), we did not constrain our sampling to individuals who engage in excessive drinking and/or experience negative drinking-related consequences.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 32$, 63.0% women¹, $M_{age} = 32.8$, $SD_{age} = 12.2$, age range = 21-59 years) were recruited from a large and ethnically diverse metroplex in the southwestern region of the United States. Over one-third of the population in the community identify as Latinx or Hispanic, and Mexican Americans make up 84% of the Latinx population in the region. Individuals were

¹ No participants reported transgender or nonbinary gender identities.

eligible for our study if they were 21 years or older, and were either (Mexico-born) first-generation immigrants or (U.S.-born) second-generation Mexican Americans. As the first study of its kind, we limited data collection from Mexican Americans who were English-speaking to ensure high fidelity to the interview protocol. Our sample included monolingual and bilingual individuals; 90% of the participants were fluent in both English and Spanish.² Nineteen participants were born in the U.S., and the other 13 participants were born in Mexico (median age at immigration = 6.5 years). All participants reported to have consumed alcohol in their lifetime, although drinker status was not an eligibility criterion to participate in this study. Our sample median household income ranged from \$40,001-60,000, which was consistent with the national median annual household income recorded in 2015 (Flores et al., 2017).

Researcher Backgrounds and Reflexivity

Our research team comprised a doctoral-level principal investigator, a doctoral-level external auditor, two graduate students, and four post-baccalaureate or undergraduate research assistants. The first author is the principal investigator and an Asian American with research expertise in ethnic diversity issues in alcohol use. She participated in all aspects of this study. The second author is the external auditor and an Asian American immigrant with research expertise in qualitative methods and ethnic minority mental health. The third author is an Asian American doctoral student in clinical psychology; she is interested in acculturation and psychological adjustment of immigrant populations and is fluent in conversational Spanish. The fourth author is an Egyptian American research assistant with research interests in anxiety and substance misuse. Both third and fourth authors contributed to transcription, coding, and writing of this research report. The fifth and sixth author are both bilingual Mexican Americans. They

² All English-only participants were native-born.

were responsible for participant recruitment, moderating focus group sessions, and contributed to data analysis. The last author is an Asian American with expertise on alcohol use and cultural processes, and contributed to the interpretation of results. The other two research assistants are of Euro American backgrounds; they have lived in areas with ethnic diversity and strong representation of Latinx and other minority communities and contributed to transcriptions and interpretation of coding themes. The research team has prior knowledge and understanding of epidemiological patterns that indicate an alcohol immigrant paradox. Researchers also have the expertise in acculturation, ethnic and nativity differences in alcohol use outcomes. Collectively, our prior knowledge not only informed our ability to moderate focus groups in probing for more information, but also enhanced our proficiency in conducting content analysis. The research team did not have a priori expectations about participants' perceptions of the immigrant paradox phenomenon.

Procedures

After receiving University Institutional Review Board approval, individuals were recruited through flyers distributed at local Latinx-oriented churches, schools, on social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), and on websites that host local volunteering opportunities and job listings (e.g., Craigslist). Interested community adults ($N = 61$) were screened for eligibility via the phone or email correspondence. Individuals who met inclusion criteria ($N = 56$) were assigned to focus groups based on their availability. After taking account of no-shows or not responding to scheduling invitations, our final sample included 32 participants.

We conducted 11 focus group interview sessions, and each session lasted 60 to 90 minutes. All interview sessions were video recorded. Interviews were conducted in English with at least one moderator/researcher who was fluent in Spanish. Ten focus groups consisted of two

to six participants. One focus group contained only one participant because of no-shows. Most focus groups ($k = 7$) included both U.S.- and Mexico-born participants. Additionally, seven groups comprised men and women, and three groups consisted of women only.

Individuals independently provided informed consent and completed a brief demographic survey prior to participating in the moderated group discussions. Focus group interview questions included participants' perceptions about Mexican Americans' drinking patterns, beliefs and norms about alcohol use in Mexican and the U.S. cultures, and factors that they perceived to help explain the Mexican immigrant paradox in alcohol use (see supplemental appendix). Each participant received \$30 as compensation. Following the grounded theory and inductive thematic saturation process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saunders et al., 2018), we monitored our data collection continuously by evaluating moderators' field notes and emerging themes from the interviews. Data collection was stopped when no new themes were emerged from the interviews.

Data Preparation and Analysis

Researchers transcribed each video recording from focus group interviews and made note of nonverbal communication and gestures (e.g., laughter, nod), following common qualitative research procedures (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). We used a grounded theory approach for data analysis to allow meaning to emerge from the raw data. Participants' narratives were categorized through open and axial coding. Primary themes and subthemes were developed near the end of the coding process, after data were thoroughly analyzed, grouped, and organized. Throughout the coding process, we followed the consensual qualitative research methods for triangulation (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). Each coder independently reviewed all transcriptions at their entirety and moderators' field notes to generate a list of codes. The coding team then collectively developed themes and subthemes. The coding team members

met regularly to review and resolve discrepancies across coders through discussions. Group consensus throughout the process served as the first method of triangulation. An auditor not involved in data collection or coding was included as a second method of triangulation. The auditor independently examined the thematic coding structures and the associated narratives, then provided feedback to the coding team. Once the coding team and the auditor came to consensus, a final thematic structure was confirmed.

Using the guidelines in consensual qualitative research methods, thematic categories and subthemes were characterized by the frequency of occurrence across participants (Hill et al., 2005). Themes and subthemes would be characterized as “general” if they included all participants or all but one participant. “Typical” categories would refer to themes that were endorsed by more than half of the participants, whereas “variant” categories would refer to themes that were endorsed by at least three participants.

Results

None of our participants had heard of the immigrant paradox prior to this study. Upon hearing the definition of the immigrant paradox in alcohol use, most Mexican American individuals indicated that they had observed drinking patterns that were consistent with this paradox in their community. Three themes emerged across all participants: (1) exposure to drinking-related risks in the U.S., (2) loss of Mexican cultural elements that are protective against alcohol use, and (3) deterrents for alcohol use among immigrants. There were no differences in the participants’ perspectives across demographic backgrounds (e.g., age, gender, nativity status) or across focus group interview sessions.

1. Exposure to Drinking-Related Risks in the U.S. (Typical)

Participants believed that Mexican Americans in the U.S. were more prone to be exposed

to permissive drinking beliefs and risks for hazardous alcohol use than their counterparts living in Mexico. The risk factors that were proposed included *social contexts promoting drinking*, *media influences*, *gender norms in alcohol use*, and *perceived stress*.

1a. Social Contexts for Permissive Facilitation of Alcohol Use (Variant)

Participants spoke to the various ways in which facilitation of alcohol use was more permissive and pervasive in the U.S. than in Mexico. Participants described cultural differences in how alcohol was perceived and consumed in both U.S. and Mexican societies.

I think in American culture [alcohol] is more like [something] you use, a tool you use to party, while in Mexico it might not be that way—it's more like something that you add to yourself... like dinner [with] a drink. It's not something you do to get ready for a party. –U.S.-born man, age 21

Compared to Mexico, participants noted that typically there was greater availability of alcohol and easier access to liquor stores and other social contexts in the U.S. They believed that these social contexts helped promote frequent and large-volume alcohol consumption among native-born Mexican Americans and other people living in the U.S. Specifically, participants pointed out the roles of the college environment, and bars and happy hours, and thought that these contexts reinforced a mainstream U.S. cultural script for drinking.

1a-i. College Drinking (Variant). Participants stated that college drinking tended to be glorified in the U.S. They believed that these societal norms reinforced the notion that alcohol involvement was a rite of passage for young adults attending college.

What I see here [in the U.S.] are frats, partying and that being glorified... [drinking is] something you should be doing once you go to college. ... That's why [young adults in college] end up drinking more, because they think it's part of the experience and they have to do it. –Mexico-born man, age 21

1a-ii. Role of Bars and Happy Hours (Variant). Many participants agreed that bars had different functions and social meaning in the U.S. than in Mexico. They reported that bars

typically were stigmatized in Mexico but were viewed as acceptable places to socialize in the U.S. Relatedly, participants stated that happy hours at bars and restaurants were normalized in the mainstream American culture, hence, reduction in costs for buying alcohol likely encouraged more frequent drinking in later-generation Mexican individuals than immigrants.

A bar in Mexico is only for drunks to hang out. A bar [in the U.S.] is a place to socialize, to gather; they don't frown upon it [and] you don't see it as a bad place. –U.S.-born woman, age 35

Once you get into the U.S.—it might be a culture thing, but my work outings—they're all [about] happy hours and everyone's drinking. –U.S.-born woman, age 29

1b. Media Influence as a Vehicle for Socialization (Variant)

Participants discussed the effects of media on people's exposure to alcohol. They believed that the media contributed to the pervasiveness of liberal attitudes toward alcohol consumption and reinforced the acceptability of drinking in the mainstream U.S. society.

Here in the U.S., you see a lot of drinks. You see a lot of commercials and all this stuff; in Mexico, it's not that prevalent. –Mexico-born man, age unknown

If [people] see billboards, they see commercials, they see it on TV, [then they see] how it's normalized. So they think, 'let's go ahead and get a beer, let's get some wine to relieve my stress.' –U.S.-born woman, age 24

It gets encoded in your mind with all the advertising and TV. You see it on TV and everywhere. They cater to certain areas, like, 'Did you go to so-and-so park? We went to Austin last weekend. We went to 6th street and man you should see how cool it is.' –U.S.-born man, age 35

1c. Gender Norms and Permissiveness of Drinking Culture (Variant)

Within the more liberal attitudes toward alcohol use in the mainstream U.S. culture than Mexican culture, participants spoke to the notion that cultural differences in gender norms further enhanced native-born individuals' acceptability of alcohol use and in drinking norms. Although they recognized the presence of gender differences in drinking behaviors and attitudes

toward alcohol use in the U.S. society, participants believed that gendered cultural scripts around alcohol use were more salient for women than men in the Mexican culture. These observations led them to attribute greater alcohol consumption in U.S.-born Mexican women than foreign-born Mexican women to fewer restrictive gender role norms in the U.S., relative to Mexico.

Here [in the U.S.] if a woman drinks, she is liberal... In Mexico, women aren't supposed to get drunk.

It is more acceptable for a man to get drunk, like, 'Oh it is because he works so much. Oh, he had a very tough day.' –Mexico-born woman, age 44

Participants also shared their own gendered experiences with alcohol use and patterns across men and women that they had observed in their families:

What I've seen in my family, my grandma, she didn't drink. My grandpa was a heavy drinker. Pretty much every man from my family, they drink. And women... maybe my cousins who are from here [the U.S.], born here, and grew up here, they drink and that's normal, but for older generations, my aunts don't drink. I think it's a big influence for women... going back to what I said, 'oh she's a prostitute, that's what they think' [if a woman drinks]. –U.S.-born woman, age 38

1d. Perceived Stress in the U.S. (Variant)

Participants perceived life in the U.S. to be more stressful than in Mexico. They discussed the idea that stress potentially heightened people's tendency of using alcohol as a maladaptive coping strategy. In explaining how stress in the U.S. was related to alcohol use, participants noted that the U.S. was inherently a stressful place because of its lifestyle:

[W]e have a very workaholic mentality [in America] that brings a lot of stress. A lot of people cope by drinking because that's what we see and that's what's available, and that's what's legal, so we adhere to it. –U.S.-born man, age 26

Additionally, compared to Mexico-born individuals, participants considered additional acculturation-related challenges and stresses that were faced by U.S.-born Mexican Americans. They believed that these unique stressors increased people's likelihood of drinking to cope.

I think because there's so much pressure, I would say maybe it's intergenerational trauma or something, from parents coming here and living up to the pressure of, 'Oh I came here to give you a better life,' so you have to live up to this higher ideal and there's a lot of pressure on second-generation Mexican Americans to do better than their parents, to have some type of upward mobility, to go to college, and all of these other things. I think that a lot of my fellow second-generation Mexican friends also have a lot of that internalized pressure, where they use alcohol to de-stress from that constant barrage. –U.S.-born woman, age 29

One of the issues as offspring, you are kind of divided. For some people, like I don't fully speak the [Spanish] language, but then I am also not fully American even though I am American like I was born in the U.S., I don't have all the aspects of ... a White person would who was born in America. So you are also still dealing with those issues of fitting in, and trying to navigate through the different aspects... I think that can lead to a lot of mental stress and anxiety in social settings and going somewhere and like, 'Okay I have to go and I have to present myself in this way because I am representing this group of [Mexican American] people,' and think it can be really stressful... Especially in younger people in my age range, drinking is a coping method, right? Like it can make you feel more comfortable in social settings, or it could make you feel more comfortable [and] more able to navigate through things without being as personally stressed out because you are somewhat removed from it under the influence of alcohol. –U.S.-born woman, age 31

2. Loss of Mexican Cultural Elements Protective against Alcohol Use (Typical)

Another theme that emerged from our data concerned the loss of traditional Mexican values or norms that were protective against alcohol involvement. The three subthemes included generational differences in: *cultural socialization around alcohol and drinking*, *support from the family and community*, and *societal sanctions against hazardous alcohol use*.

2a. Cultural Socialization around Alcohol and Drinking (Typical)

One key aspect that participants believed to be protective against hazardous alcohol use and drinking-related consequences had to do with Mexican family's socialization around alcohol

involvement. Although Mexicans might initiate drinking at an earlier age than other people in the U.S., participants stated that Mexican parents would educate their young children about alcohol and teach them ways to drink safely. Specifically, participants believed that this kind of socialization prevented people in their community from engaging in hazardous drinking. For example,

A lot of times in Mexico when we drink, it's with our family at parties. We're not drinking to get messed up, we just drink because that's part of the culture. You develop a different relationship with alcohol because it's our culture. It's not something I have to binge and get crazy with. It's not a coping mechanism as much as like it's *para convivir* [to get together]. –U.S.-born man, age 26

Similarly, participants emphasized the importance of alcohol socialization in the Mexican community for teaching people about knowing their limits and carefully monitoring alcohol consumption levels:

I think it's just the holding your liquor part, really learning how to drink. They [family members] don't want you to get sloppy drunk. They want you to learn how to drink. So whenever you're put in that situation, you know how to know your limits and know when to say no and drink as much as your limit lets you. –Mexico-born woman, age 22

2b. Support from the Family and Community (Variant)

The loss of family orientation and support was considered one of the key reasons for immigrant paradox in alcohol use. Compared to U.S.-born individuals, participants stated that Mexican immigrants tended to receive more family and community support as a result of their immersion in a collectivistic culture. For later-generation Mexican Americans, considering drinking as a means to cope with life stresses, a relative decline in family and community connectedness could lead to an increased risk for alcohol consumption.

With a lot of [the] Latinx culture is more family based, whereas [in America] it's more individualistic. I could see that maybe over a number of generations, you kind of adopt that [individualistic

orientation]... and you lose that family support... Maybe that kind of drives you toward alcoholism... if you don't necessarily have that family member or someone there to provide you with any sort of guidance or support, you're more likely to seek other methods [to cope]. –U.S.-born man, age 22

2c. Societal Sanctions against Hazardous Alcohol Use (Variant)

Participants discussed the idea of societal sanctions that could prevent or discourage alcohol misuse among individuals who were more immersed in the Mexican culture. These societal sanctions stemmed from both the Mexican culture and the religious community.

2c-i. Shame in the Mexican Culture (Variant). First, participants highlighted the cultural emphasis of not bringing shame to their families, which was considered an important motivation for monitoring people's own behaviors. Stemming from the collectivistic orientation in the Mexican culture, participants noted that individuals who were seen drunk by others or were known to engage in hazardous alcohol use would be considered shameful for ruining the reputation of their entire family:

[In] Mexican culture, if you mess up, you're messing it up for everybody. –Mexico-born man, age 23
My family was really big on what everyone else thought. That fear was instilled into me like, 'don't act [like] a fool because your *tías* [aunts] are going to know then I'll have to deal with that.' My aunts are more—I feel like they don't have a filter, they're more honest. If they see me going down the wrong path, they'll call me out and say 'why are you doing that? That's bad.' ...and then I have to have that conversation with them. –Mexico-born woman, age 31

2c-ii. Religion (Variant). Participants noted that Catholicism was a prominent part of their culture; this religious connection also meant that there were values and expectations that governed people's behaviors. Particularly, the influence of Catholicism was considered to be more imminent in Mexico than in the U.S., thus these religious values might function as stronger deterrents for individuals born in Mexico than individuals born in the U.S. For example,

I know most [Mexicans] are Catholics. The whole image of being a Catholic, you're supposed to be

good, you can't be an alcoholic, you can't do anything bad. You're supposed to be good in everything.

I phased out of the whole Catholic thing, but my mom is very Catholic. And she's like 'oh no, you can't do this or that.' –U.S.-born woman, age 24

It's like you're starting to fall off the wagon if you're starting to be a drunk or starting to drink everyday. You get the religious people—whether they're doing it [in a] positive or negative way—they are just there being a nag. They try to bring you back; 'Oh, you're an alcoholic, that's what we're here to help you with.' ... Religious [people] tend to be more in your business. It can be positive or negative. Sometimes it wakes them up to reality and they're like 'Oh yeah, I'm a drunk. I'll straighten it out.' –U.S.-born man, age 35

3. Deterrents for Alcohol Use Specific to Immigrants (Typical)

A third theme tapped into factors that might deter Mexico-born immigrants from engaging in hazardous alcohol use. The three subthemes included *threat of legal consequences*, *immigration goals of a better life*, and *limited disposable income*.

3a. Threat of Legal Consequences (Typical)

Participants consistently talked about Mexico-born individuals' acute awareness of the threat of legal consequences associated with alcohol misuse. People noted that such a threat was more imminent for immigrants than their U.S.-born counterparts. For example,

[Immigrants] don't want to get in trouble with the police or anything where their families get separated. They know there are a lot of things associated with alcohol, such as DWI [driving while intoxicated]... that could definitely get them deported. They don't want to put themselves in that situation where they could lose everything. –Mexico-born woman, age 22

I feel like if I go out drinking or whatever, I'm not risking as much as if, let's say my parents drink, when they were my age. [T]hey would get deported or [law enforcement] would be like, 'oh where's your ID' and things would get complicated. With us second-generations... you're not risking as much, [you won't get] deported just because you were drunk or something. –U.S.-born man, age 24

3b. Immigration Goals of a Better Life (Variant)

Distinct to the immigration experiences of foreign-born Mexican Americans, participants believed that immigrants often migrated to the U.S. with the goals of bettering their own and their family's lives, and hazardous alcohol use was often considered to be incongruent with these goals. For example,

[As a first-generation immigrant] you're looking to better yourself... You're just looking for a better life in general. You're not looking to drink and stuff like that. A lot of people that become Americanized, party all day, some do drugs, some do alcohol, because they don't have the repercussions [whereas] I have something on my shoulders. Immigrants they want to excel. They want to prove something. –Mexico-born man, age unknown

Similarly, participants stated that immigrants were intentional about working hard to attain the immigration goals, and therefore would not have the time to squander and engage in risky drinking behaviors:

When my mom first got here, she was working two jobs. She would just go to work all day, come home, wake up like four hours later, and go back. She has kids, so she didn't have time for all that [drinking]. –U.S.-born man, age 22

3c. Limited Disposable Income (Variant)

Beyond having different goals and less time to spare, participants spoke to the idea that immigrants simply did not have as much disposable income to spend on alcohol as later-generation Mexican Americans.

If [immigrants] are coming over, I'm assuming they don't even have that much money. Alcohol is expensive. You can't just go willy-nilly buying bottles. I guess you could—in theory—but I guess they are going to have to pick between feeding their kid versus [drinking] or it's going to be like, 'oh am I going to get this awesome bottle or am I going to put diapers on my kid.' –U.S.-born woman, age 29

The first generation, they were saving money. Now the younger generations, it's easier for them just to get a job and spend the money. –Mexico-born man, age 55

Discussion

Using a qualitative approach, we explored Mexican American community adults' beliefs and thoughts about the immigrant paradox in alcohol involvement. Results suggested that nativity differences in alcohol use outcomes may be because of the cultural socialization around drinking and social contexts that facilitate alcohol consumption, family support and societal sanctions, stress, and sociopolitical contexts. Thematic categories that emerged from our qualitative inquiry offer insights regarding potentially important ethnically distinctive determinants of the immigrant paradox, which in turn may yield targets that can be leveraged in prevention and treatment efforts that are responsive to the needs of Mexican Americans and possibly other Latinx Americans.

Specific Processes Implicated in Culture

Evident in the themes concerning socialization around drinking, participants noted that the U.S. and Mexico differed in how and how much alcohol would be consumed. Our results suggest that participants regard culture for having an indirect influence on drinking practices, by shaping Mexican Americans' cognitions about alcohol use, and the social environments in which they are embedded (Chen & Chien, 2018; Epler et al., 2009; Lui, 2019; Lui et al., 2020). Participants alluded to social reasons for drinking. Relative to their foreign-born peers, native-born Mexican Americans tend to be more immersed in the mainstream American society and therefore may be more aware of the U.S. drinking norms. In turn, native-born Mexican Americans may subscribe to a positive valuation of alcohol expectancies (Ceballos et al., 2012; Gibbons et al., 2010), which can promote drinking in social settings such as bars, parties where alcohol is served, and happy hours. In Mexican and other Latinx college students—a segment of the population most at risk for heavy drinking and hazardous alcohol use—being more Americanized also may expose them to adopt high-risk drinking practices such as pregameing and

drinking game participation (Perrotte et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2014; Zamboanga et al., 2017). Whereas the subtheme regarding college drinking norms appeared to be applicable to university students only, participants of all ages and educational backgrounds agreed that this social setting in the U.S. can heighten the risks of hazardous drinking among native-born Mexican Americans. Participants also alluded to coping reasons for drinking. Based on the perception that native-born Mexican Americans tended to experience greater life stresses and minority-specific stresses relative to foreign-born Mexican Americans, participants thought that drinking to cope likely explained native-born individuals' heightened risk for alcohol consumption and drinking-related problems (Conn et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2015; Terrell, 1993).

As seen in the themes that emerged from our analyses, our participants believed that both Mexican and U.S. cultural orientations can play a role in alcohol involvement among Mexican Americans. Prior research with immigrant populations has suggested that being immersed in one's ethnic heritage society reduces the risk for alcohol use and misuse (Lui & Zamboanga, 2018a, 2018b). Specifically, maintaining high levels of convivial collectivism may facilitate socializations among family and community members and promote positive emotions (Campos & Kim, 2017), which in turn help buffer against stresses and reduce the need to drink for stress reduction. Our participants' perspectives also were consistent with previous research indicating the functional importance of having large and supportive social networks in reducing stress exposure and appraisal (Ruiz et al., 2018). Similarly, spirituality and religious affiliations may be more salient among individuals who are more immersed than those who are less immersed in the Mexican culture. Declines in religiosity likely result in a decrease in the deterring effects of collective shaming and monitoring, as well as a lowered likelihood of the practices and

effectiveness of religious coping (Jankowski et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2015; Wells, 2010).

Furthermore, when coupled with an erosion of protective Mexican values, participants suggested that being exposed to more liberal drinking cultures in the U.S. likely exerts greater influences on alcohol involvement in a dynamic way (Des Rosiers et al., 2013; Perrotte & Zamboanga, 2019; Pham & Lui, 2019). For example, Mexican Americans who subscribe to more liberal attitudes toward drinking and who do not have family or same-ethnic peer support likely do not have external systems that monitor and/or regulate their drinking behaviors; these individuals in turn may be vulnerable to high-risk drinking practices.

Overall, the theme and its subthemes concerning the risks in the U.S. are consistent with general social learning theory of alcohol consumption (Bacio et al., 2013; Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). Potentially explanatory factors such as socialized alcohol expectancies and valuations and media exposure all have been shown to promote permissive attitudes and beliefs about alcohol use among U.S.-born Mexican Americans (Bacio & Ray, 2016; Davis et al., 2019; Savic et al., 2016). The subtheme concerning stress appraisal also is consistent with the stress theory of alcohol use and prior quantitative data indicating the impact of acculturation-related stress on drinking behaviors (Gil et al., 2000). Participants' perspectives in our present study help identify the possible intervening factors and causal mechanisms that link distal social contexts, media influences, and stressful environments to nativity differences in alcohol involvement. Our findings highlight the important roles of individual beliefs and valuations of alcohol use as potentially proximal determinants of drinking behaviors.

In reference to the immigrant hypothesis and erosion theory that have been postulated to explain the alcohol immigrant paradox, our qualitative analysis suggested that participants did not find the healthy immigrant hypothesis useful in accounting for nativity differences in alcohol

use. Most factors proposed by our participants have been considered in existing research and are congruent with erosion theory. Participants also suggested new factors that are not well represented in the alcohol literature with respect to nativity differences. Mexican community adults pointed out that having goals for making a better life in the U.S. and being aware of negative legal consequences such as deportation may be particularly protective against risky alcohol use among immigrants. Although prior research has shown that reasons for immigration were associated with individual differences in mental and physical health (Bianchi et al., 2006; Lui & Rollock, 2012), immigrant-related deterrents for alcohol use have not been documented in existing research. These factors may be worth systematic examination in future research and clinical applications.

Caution for Interpretation and Implications for Future Research

The present findings should be interpreted with the following conceptual, methodological considerations and future research directions in mind. First, the degree to which cultural orientations may explain nativity differences in alcohol involvement vary across environments and settings. For example, the possible effects of U.S. college drinking norms are likely relevant to university students but not community adults. The roles of the acculturation factors on drinking outcomes among residents at the U.S.-Mexico border remain unclear. Second, our participants did not include Mexican Americans who were non-English-speaking, and individuals who abstained from or were at high-risk for alcohol use. Even though the purpose of our qualitative inquiry was not meant to be generalized to the entire population, it should be noted that the themes emerged from this study may not be reflective for those who are limited in their English proficiency and/or marginalized from the mainstream U.S. society. Low levels of language and cultural competence may make certain segments of the Mexican population more

vulnerable for high-risk drinking (e.g., farm workers; Ramos et al., 2019). Future research can benefit from exploring the perceptions and attitudes among other people in the Mexican immigrant communities who may have different lived experiences due to their language proficiency, resident/documentation status, or other social identifications.

Third, in order to explore what factors Mexican Americans considered to explain the alcohol immigrant paradox phenomenon, our qualitative inquiry was conducted within the confines of an established recognition of nativity differences. It was outside of the scope of the present investigation to understand whether Mexican American participants agreed or disagreed with these epidemiological findings in the scientific literature. Participants were not given the opportunity to discuss their beliefs about how U.S.- and foreign-born Mexican Americans differ in their alcohol involvement. Fourth, focus group sessions were video recorded, therefore, it was unclear how this might have affected our results. Participants in the present study might have been less inclined to discuss sensitive topics because of potential embarrassment or loss of face than if they were interviewed electronically and anonymously, or without being videotaped (Kim et al., 2003). Fifth and finally, our data were collected at a time when the U.S. society engaged in active discourse about immigration, and observed an increase in anti-Latinx hate crimes (FBI, 2018). Our participants might have been particularly aware of the threat of legal consequences affecting Mexico-born individuals.

Whereas our current qualitative method was appropriate for addressing our aims, follow-up qualitative studies can explore themes on the same research topic further by using larger samples and participants of other personal characteristics. The present perspectives from the community adults can help advance the field in several ways. Possible explanations for the alcohol immigrant paradox proposed by our participants may inform analyses that test the

incremental validity of the risk and protective factors above and beyond static demographic variables such as nativity status and length of stay in the U.S. Quantitative research also can build on our findings by examining pathways that link ethnic-specific stressors and cultural socialization to alcohol involvement using longitudinal data. These future studies can test the influences of intervening and moderating factors that were proposed by our participants, including drinking to cope, internalized alcohol expectancies, and religious affiliations. Additionally, considering the possible impact of immersion in the mainstream U.S. culture and acculturative stress as determinants of nativity differences in Mexican Americans' drinking outcomes, future controlled laboratory experiments have the potential to advance scientific knowledge about the alcohol immigrant paradox. For example, focus group participants in the present study identified feelings of stress and ethnic identification as possible reasons for nativity differences in alcohol involvement. In laboratory studies using role plays, researchers can elicit stress responses or prime participants' American or ethnic identification (Zamboanga et al., 2016). Subsequent to these manipulations, researchers can examine alcohol use behaviors, which can help identify causal mechanisms that underlie the alcohol immigrant paradox.

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MEXICAN IMMIGRANT PARADOX IN ALCOHOL USE

Supplemental Materials

Study Procedures and Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- **Opening questions to establish connection to the research topic**
 - Begin by introducing first name, age, and how long you have been living in the U.S. [only applicable to first-generation Mexican Americans]
 - This study is intended to study immigrant paradox in alcohol use. By a show of hands, how many of you have tried alcohol at parties, family gatherings, or alone? How many of you drink socially or regularly?
 - What do you think about Mexican Americans' drinking, compared to people of other ethnic backgrounds?
- **Provide definition of immigrant paradox**
 - **Describe nativity differences in drinking status, alcohol consumption patterns, and prevalence of alcohol use disorder**
 - What do you think of this immigrant paradox? Have you noticed these patterns?
 - What do you think are reasons for this immigrant paradox?
 - **Researchers have suggested two key theories: one is the erosion theory, and the other is the healthy immigrant theory. Explain definition and assumptions for each theory.**
 - What do you think about each theory to explain immigrant paradox in alcohol use? Which one(s) do you think is/are more viable? **Facilitate discussion.**
 - Other factors that explain immigrant paradox that we have not discussed today?