Title of Paper/Presentation: Attribution of Mental Health Ailments and Depressive Symptom Burden Among Older Mexican Americans

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(a) Background: The influence of acculturation and nativity on depression remains highly contested. Among Latinos, variation in their beliefs about the causes of their mental health ailments may help explain discrepancies in these complex acculturative processes. Objective: This study sought to (a) identify differences in depressive symptomatology across psychiatric diagnoses in older Latinos, (b) examine the relationship between acculturation, nativity, and depressive symptomatology, and (c) explore cultural variation in the attribution of mental health ailments.

(b) Methods: We conducted cross-sectional analyses of 450 older Latinos (age ≥55) attending a rural mental health clinic near the U.S.-Mexico border. Patient symptoms and psychiatrists’ diagnoses from medical charts were used to assign a primary psychiatric diagnosis for each subject, and subsequently grouped into 6 categories, including depressive disorders. The Center for Epidemiological Studies of Depression (CES-D) scale was used to measure depressive symptoms. Cultural variables included nativity and a validated acculturation scale. Patients rated their level of endorsement of 13 causes of mental health ailments (e.g. supernatural causes, curses/spells, heredity, significant others). A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare attribution levels by psychiatric illness. We ran ordinal regressions to identify cultural predictors of attribution items.

(c) Results: Latinos had a mean age of 70.9 (SD= 9.1) with about 6 years of schooling. The most common primary diagnoses were depressive disorders (67.1%) and dementia (15.3%). The mean CES-D score was 15.08 (SD = 18.16), but higher for the more acculturated (p=.048), and patients with psychotic (M=26.31, SD=.19.78) and bipolar (M=26.05, SD=19.54) disorders. Higher endorsement on 12 items significantly increased CES-D scores; the belief in supernatural factors lessened symptoms. Acculturation increased attribution of mental health ailments to significant others ($\rho=.091; p =.054$), difficulty with work ($\rho=.162; p =.001$), and hereditary factors ($\rho=.202, 95\% CI=.002, .403$). Patients with psychotic disorders were most apt to attribute their symptoms to curses [$F(5,444) = 4.37, p =.001$] and supernatural factors [$F(5,444) = 2.620, p = .024$] compared to other diagnostic categories.

(d) Conclusions: Acculturated Latinos may be more intent in attributing their mental health ailments to life circumstances (e.g. work, significant others). This may intensify depressive symptoms, which may partly explain the relationship between acculturation and depressive symptoms. Further, the patients’ major diagnosis must be considered in evaluating acculturative influences on depression in psychiatric populations.