

## Linguistic Adaptation among Adolescent Children of Immigrants:

### The Role of Perceived Discrimination

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Move2 This study examines the influence of perceived discrimination on proficiency in English and non-English  
step1 languages among adolescent children of immigrants. Data from 1995 *Children of Immigrants*  
step2 *Longitudinal Study* was used. The average age of participants was 17.2 years; 1511 were females and  
1351 were males. Among 2862 participants, 61% reported Latin American and Caribbean national origin,  
step3 38% reported Asian national origin and one percent reported other national origin. The findings showed  
significant association between participants' personal perceptions of discrimination and their English  
language proficiency. Perceived societal discrimination and discrimination by students at school were  
associated with lower English language proficiency. Discrimination by teachers and counselors at school  
step4 was associated with higher oral proficiency and especially literacy in English. The results highlight the  
importance of negative immigrant and ethnic stereotypes in schools and in a larger society and the  
complex role of teachers and counselors in adolescents' linguistic and social development. The findings  
underscore the need to account for personal experiences of discrimination when studying linguistic  
adaptation of adolescent children of immigrants.

KEYWORDS: Children of Immigrants; Language proficiency; Discrimination

This study examines how perceived discrimination influences processes of linguistic adaptation. It answers the question of whether, and how, personal perceptions of discrimination affect self-reported oral proficiency and literacy in English and non-English languages among adolescent children of immigrants. The importance of this study is highlighted by the association of adolescents' English and non-English language proficiency with their socio-emotional well-being (McKay and Wong, 1996; Norton Pierce, 1995; Powers and Sanches, 1982; Rumbaut, 1994; Schecter and Bayley, 1997), academic achievement (Cummins, 1979; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1994) and future academic and employment opportunities (Chiswick and Miller, 1998; Xu, 1991). The social relevance of this study is underscored by the pervasiveness of discrimination in everyday life.

Perceived discrimination defined as "a belief that one has been treated unfairly because of one's origin" (Mesch et al., 2008:592) is a common experience in the United States. Results from the Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) survey, carried out in 1996, indicate that 33 percent of the participants ages 25-74 have experienced major discriminatory events and 61 percent reported feeling

discriminated against on a daily basis (Kessler et al. 1999). While no such data are available for adolescents, previous research suggests that perceived discrimination is also prevalent among minority youth (Greene et al. 2006; Fisher et al. 2000; Romero and Roberts 1998).

The adolescent egocentricity and the emerging ability to take into account opinions of others, combined with their increased autonomy from the immigrant parents, make adolescent children of immigrants particularly sensitive to evaluations by peers, teachers, and significant others (Dornbusch 1989). Studies show that adolescents' perceptions of discrimination have a critical impact on their socio-emotional well-being, self-identification and later life outcomes. Children of immigrants who feel discriminated against are more likely to report lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms (Greene et al. 2006; Fisher et al. 2000; Romero and Roberts 1998), higher occurrence of problem behaviors and lower academic achievement (Fisher et al. 2000; Wong et al. 2003). Perceived discrimination also influences processes of social and ethnic identity formation (Erikson 1968; Greene et al. 2006; Mesch et al. 2008; Mossakowski 2003; Romero and Roberts 1998; Rumbaut 1994). Past studies agree about the significant negative effect of perceived discrimination on adolescents' social and psychological development. However, despite these disturbing findings, our knowledge about the role of perceived discrimination in youth's linguistic development is still very limited.

Studies identify lower English language proficiency and accented English among the primary causes of both personal negative discrimination and a growing resentment toward immigration as a threat to the national American identity (Citrin et al. 1990; Espenshade and Calhoun 1993; Hernandez 1993; Huntington 2004; Lippi-Green 1997). The findings indicate that the general public often perceives language assimilation toward an idealized standard English language as a natural process, necessary and positive for immigrant well-being and for the greater social good (Citrin et al. 1990; Lippi-Green 1997). However, this view of linguistic assimilation as a way to alleviate personal discrimination fails to acknowledge that linguistic adaptation is not only a demographic but as a social and psychological phenomenon. If lower English language proficiency and accented English of immigrants and their children trigger personal discrimination against them, how do perceptions of this discrimination influence

patterns of immigrant linguistic adaptation? More specifically, how does perceived discrimination influence self-reported proficiency in English and non-English languages among children of immigrants? In the absence of empirical research, the nature and mechanism of this relationship remain uncertain.

#### Perceived Discrimination and Linguistic Adaptation: Three Approaches

The current study identifies three approaches and proposes three specific hypotheses about the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-reported language proficiency. The first approach argues that language constitutes a central element of ethnic identity and, therefore, non-English language maintenance is associated with stronger ethnic identity (Fishman 1966; Tajfel 1974). Societal ethnic indifference, as opposing to discrimination, weakens ethnic identity and facilitates the shift toward English, characterized by an increasing proficiency in English and decreasing proficiency in a non-English language (Fishman 1966). Perceptions of discrimination, on the other hand, increase individual preference for ethnic in-group identification (Rumbaut 1994) and as a consequence, increase individual investments in the non-English language (Fishman 1966; Hamers and Blanc 2000). This approach and the related hypothesis have played an important role in explaining the phenomenon of non-English language maintenance in the United States and abroad (Fishman 1966). However, it has also been criticized for assuming a direct link between ethnic identity and language skills.

Giles and his colleagues (1977) and Edwards (1985) address this limitation by proposing that the relationship between ethnic identity and language is more pragmatic. Individuals are motivated to adjust their speech styles as a means of expressing values, attitudes and intentions towards others (Giles et al. 1977). In a context of the English language dominance in the United States, perceptions of discrimination may encourage individuals to invest in their English language proficiency in order to achieve greater acceptance in the host society (Edwards 1985; Galindo 1995; Hernandez 1993). This approach assumes that the relationship between perceived discrimination and language proficiency is mediated by the strength of ethnic identity and that individual speakers may shift toward English even in an attempt to preserve other valuable elements of their ethnic identity. Past research suggests, however, that perceived discrimination may also have a direct impact on English language proficiency by drawing boundaries

between social groups and by limiting opportunities to use the English language in a natural social environment.

Studies show that adolescents who feel discriminated against are excluded from participating in English-dominant activities and networks (Fisher et al. 2000; McKay and Wong 1996) and, therefore, have restricted opportunities to improve their English language in the context of natural social interactions. Discrimination can also increase anxiety about social status generally and language skills in particular, thus making adolescent children of immigrants more likely to avoid social situations that could be potentially damaging to their social identity and challenging for their English language skills (Felix 2004; Hamers and Blanc 2000; McKay and Wong 1996; Norton Pierce 1995). In other words, perceived discrimination restricts adolescents' language choices. Less practice, in turn, directly leads to delayed English language development and lower English language proficiency.

These three approaches suggest distinct mechanisms of the relationship between perceived discrimination and language proficiency by emphasizing the mediating role of ethnic identity and the possible direct impact on language development. By exploring relationships between linguistic adaptation and the social context of language use, these approaches extend current socio-demographic explanations of linguistic adaptation of adolescent children of immigrants and create a foundation for specific hypotheses of the current study.

#### Additional Correlates with Linguistic Adaptation

The literature emphasizes ethnic origin, length of stay in the United States and age of arrival, gender, and parental and household characteristics among key predictors of the degree of individual exposure to English or non-English languages and individual efficiency in maintaining and advancing these languages (Chiswick and Miller 2007). Sociological studies show that the average level of self-reported proficiency in English and non-English languages varies across ethnic groups. According to the U.S. Census and past research (Portes and Hao 1998; Alba et al. 2002), children of Mexican origin are more proficient in their non-English language (Spanish) than children from other ethnic groups, while

children of Asian origin are least proficient in their non-English languages and more likely to report higher proficiency in English.

Studies also show that, controlling for ethnic origin, higher self-reported English language proficiency in children of immigrants is associated with a longer stay in the United States (Bean and Stevens 2003; Chiswick and Miller 1998; Portes and Hao 1998), mixed parental nativity (Alba et al. 2002; Stevens 1985), presence of older siblings in a household (Caldas and Caron-Caldas 2002; Pease-Alvarez 2002; Stevens and Ishizawa 2007), and higher family socio-economic status (Alba et al. 2002; Portes and Hao 1998; Portes and Schaufler 1994). Higher proficiency in a non-English language is associated with recency of arrival and older age upon arrival to the United States, larger number of non-English language speakers in a household and a use of a non-English language with friends (Alba et al. 2002; Portes and Hao 1998). Adolescents with two-foreign born parents speaking the same non-English language are more likely to be proficient in their non-English language than youth from linguistically heterogeneous families (Stevens 1985). Research shows that linguistic adaptation is also a gendered process: girls are more likely to be bilingual in both English and non-English languages than boys (Hamers and Blanc 2000; Portes and Hao 1998; Portes and Schaufler 1994).

These past studies create a foundation for future research of linguistic adaptation among children of immigrants; however, their contribution is often narrowed by focusing on demographic explanations of language proficiency. By muting the importance of personal choice or lack of it, these past studies tend to oversimplify the process of linguistic adaptation generally and the influence of the social context of language use on bilingual development in particular.

#### Current Study

The primary goal of this study was to examine the role of perceived discrimination among socio-demographic predictors of immigrant linguistic adaptation by investigating whether, and how, personal perceptions of discrimination affect self-reported oral proficiency and literacy in English and non-English languages among adolescent children of immigrants in Florida and California. Based on the three

approaches to the relationship between perceived discrimination and linguistic adaptation, this study proposes three specific hypotheses.

The first hypothesis, *the non-English language learning hypothesis*, proposes that perceptions of discrimination strengthen ethnic identity and increase the personal value of a non-English language. Therefore, perceived discrimination is associated with higher proficiency in a non-English language. Given that adolescent children of immigrants learn English at school regardless of their experiences of discrimination, perceived discrimination has no significant effect on English language proficiency.

The second hypothesis, *the English language learning hypothesis*, proposes that perceptions of discrimination challenge ethnic identity and highlight the importance of a dominant language for social inclusion. Therefore, perceived discrimination is associated with higher English language proficiency. Given that these increasing investments in English language may be associated with disinvestment in a non-English language, perceived discrimination has negative or no effect on non-English language proficiency.

The third hypothesis, *the disinvestment hypothesis*, suggests that as a mechanism of social exclusion, perceived discrimination limits opportunities to practice English language in a natural speech environment. Therefore, perceived discrimination is associated with lower self-reported proficiency in English. Since perceptions of discrimination may also devalue the non-English language, perceived discrimination has negative or no effect on non-English language proficiency.

While the three hypotheses focus on the impact on perceived discrimination on the level of language proficiency, they share an additional dimension of the relative impact of perceived discrimination on the two languages. By testing these hypotheses, this study also examines the distinct ways in which perceived discrimination influences English and non-English languages.

#### Method

#### Sample

This analysis uses data from the *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study* (CILS). The CILS is a survey designed to explore the adaptation process of adolescent children of immigrants, defined as U.S.-

born children with at least one foreign-born parent and children born abroad but brought to the United States at an early age (CILS 2005). The 1992 baseline had a sample of 5262 of 8th and 9th-grade students from 42 schools and represented more than 70 ethnic groups; however, the largest ethnic concentrations included Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and West Indians in South Florida, and Mexicans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians in California. Fifty-four percent of the interviews were conducted in Miami and Ft. Lauderdale and 46 percent in San Diego (CILS 2005). The 1995 follow-up, utilized in this study, included 4288 participants.

The analysis focused on the second wave of the CILS for three reasons. First, mid-adolescence was more relevant for this study than early adolescence or early adulthood due to the increasing autonomy of the children of immigrants from their immigrant parents and their ongoing exposure to the influences at school and outside of school. Second, given the focus of this study on the impact of the immediate social environment on self-reported language proficiency, it was important to examine the simultaneous relationship between these two measures while acknowledging its possible bidirectional nature. Finally, due to possible discontinuity of adolescent experiences between the survey years, the 1992 data on perceived discrimination was not an accurate predictor of self-reported language proficiency reported in 1995. Over the three years between the surveys, the majority of the participants transitioned from middle and junior high to high school. For the adolescent children of immigrants, that transition was associated with changing social environment at school: 17% of participants reported increased discrimination by other students (“no” in 1992 and “yes” in 1995) and 16% reported decreased discrimination by other students (“yes” in 1992 and “no” in 1995); 51 % of participants continuously reported no discrimination by other students while 16% reported discrimination in both surveys.

The sample for the analysis was further limited to those participants who reported in 1995 that people living in their homes spoke a non-English language. More than 92% of the total 1995 sample met that condition. The presence of non-English language speakers in a household served as a proxy for the non-English dominant language of a country of origin. Families speaking only English were likely to come from countries with dominant English language and followed a different path of linguistic

assimilation (Bean and Stevens 2003). Non-English language speakers in a household also served as a reference, which adolescents could use to evaluate their own proficiency in the non-English language. The final sample for this analysis included 2862 participants.

## Measures

### *Language Proficiency*

Table 1 lists descriptions and descriptive statistics for dependent, independent and control variables included in the analysis. The CILS measured language proficiency using four questions for each language with possible answers ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“very well”): “How well do you understand English [language other than English]?”; “How well do you speak English [language other than English]?”; “How well do you read English [language other than English]?”; “How well do you write English [language other than English]?” The analysis, presented in this paper, distinguishes oral proficiency from literacy. Oral proficiency was measured as an average of understanding and speaking abilities. Literacy was measured as an average of reading and writing abilities. The 1992 Stanford Reading Achievement Test score, collected from school records, was used as a proxy for participants’ objective proficiency in English.

### *Perceived Discrimination*

Personal discrimination by students, teachers and counselors, ethnic discrimination measure of personal discrimination were constructed using two CILS questions: “Have you ever felt discriminated against?” (1=Yes; 0 = No); “(If yes) And by whom did you feel discriminated? (Check all that apply): a. Teachers; b. Students; c. Counselors; d. White Americans in general; e. Latinos in general; f. African Americans in general; g. Others (write in).”

In this analysis personal discrimination by students at school was a dichotomous variable (1=Yes; 0 = otherwise). Personal discrimination by teachers and counselors at school was an additive index. Personal ethnic discrimination by African Americans, or White Americans, or Latinos was also an additive index. The measure of perceived societal discrimination was a composite scale consisting of three items with answers ranging from 1 (“Disagree a lot”) to 4 (“Agree a lot”): Item 1 “There is racial



discrimination in economic opportunities in the U.S.”; Item 2 “There is much conflict between different racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.”; Item 3 “Americans generally feel superior to foreigners.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .521. Table 2 reports pairwise correlation coefficients for the perceived discrimination variables and the participant’s score on the Stanford Reading Achievement Test in English.

### Control Variables

In this analysis, age was measured in years by adding 3 to age reported in 1992. Gender was coded 1 for females and 0 for males. The three dichotomous variables for the length of residence in the United States were constructed from the ordinal variable with three categories “In US less than 8 years,” “In US 8 to 12 years,” and “In US 13 or more years, or native-born”. Participants’ national origin was a set of dichotomous variables including Asia, Caribbean, Cuba, Mexico, Other Latin America, Other (Canada, Europe, Middle East, Africa), and Philippines.

Family cohesion was a composite scale consisting of three items each ranging from 1 (“Never”) to 5 (“Always”): Item 1 “Family members like to spend time with each other”; Item 2 “Family members feel very close to each other”; Item 3 “Family togetherness is very important.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .85. Intact family was coded 1 when the participant resided in a household with both biological or adoptive parents and 0 otherwise. Parental nativity was coded 1 when both parents were foreign-born and 0 when either of the parents was U.S.-born. Parental education included mother’s and father’s level of education consisting of three categories: “less than high school,” “high school graduate” and “college graduate.” Since parents’ levels of education were highly correlated ( $r = 0.57, p < .001$ ), the analysis uses an additive index of father’s and mother’s education. Father’s or mother’s employment status was coded 1 when father or mother was employed full-time and 0 otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> The results of the factor analysis indicated the one-dimensional structure of the perceived societal discrimination scale. The extracted Factor 1 was highly correlated with Item 1 ( $r=0.78, p<0.001$ ), Item 2 ( $r=0.79, p<0.001$ ) and Item 3 ( $r=0.55, p<0.001$ ).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The majority of participants in the sample had a Latin American ethnic background and spoke Spanish. Among 2862 participants, 61% reported Latin American and Caribbean national origin, 38% report Asian national origin and one percent reported other national origin including Africa, Canada, Europe and Middle East. The majority of the participants (60%) reported Spanish as their non-English language, followed by Tagalog and other Philippine languages (17%), Vietnamese (7%), Laotian (4%) and other languages.

The average age of participants in the sample was 17.2 years, 1511 were females and 1351 were males, 76% of the participants had spent 13 or more years in the United States or were U.S.-born, 21% spent 8 to 12 years and 3% less than eight years. About 88% of the participants reported having two foreign-born parents, and 75% of the participants lived in intact families with both of their biological or adoptive parents present in the household. More than two-thirds of the participants' parents were high school graduates (46% of mothers and 47.5% of fathers) or college graduates (24% among mothers and fathers) and almost one-third had lower than high school education (30% of mothers and 28% of fathers). About 82% of fathers and 69% of mothers were employed full-time. The participants reported relatively high levels of family closeness. In 1995, the average score on the family cohesion scale ranging from 1 to 5 was 3.63 with a standard deviation of .0.99.

The majority of the participants were bilingual with dominant English language. The average oral proficiency scores for English and non-English languages were 3.85 and 3.09 respectively with standard deviations of 0.35 and 0.9. The average literacy score for English and non-English languages were 3.77 and 2.51 respectively, with standard deviations of 0.43 and 1.04. The average score on the SRAT was 671, ranging from 527 to 830, with a standard deviation of 38.56. The mean score of 671 corresponded to the 42nd national percentile on the SRAT in 1992.

Finally, perceptions of personal discrimination were common among the participants: 57% of them reported at least one of the sources of discrimination. Among those participants who felt

discriminated against, 23% reported one of the sources while 2% reported all six sources of discrimination. By the source of discrimination, 33% of the participants reported discrimination by students at school, 23% by teachers, 8% by counselors, 29% by White Americans in general, 11% by Latinos in general and 23% by African Americans in general. The average score on the perceived societal discrimination scale ranging from 1 to 4 was 1.78 with a standard deviation of 0.54.

### Regression Analysis

Table 3 lists OLS regression coefficients and t-statistics for models predicting self-reported oral language proficiency and literacy in English and non-English languages among children of immigrants. Models 1 through 4 describe the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-reported language proficiency controlling for non-linguistic confounding factors only. Models 5 through 8 describe the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-reported language proficiency controlling for non-linguistic and linguistic (SRAT score) confounding factors.

Associations between perceived discrimination and language proficiency may be due to a variety of factors. To minimize the possibility of observing spurious relationships, all eight models in the analysis include three sets of non-linguistic confounding factors: adolescent's characteristics (age, gender, length of residence in the U.S.), family characteristics (family cohesion, parental nativity, intact family, parental education and parental employment status) and national origin.

#### *Models with non-linguistic control variables only*

Findings from Models 1 through 4 reported in Table 3 form the foundation of this study. The findings suggest that perceived discrimination influences English language proficiency and has no effect on non-English language skills. Perceived societal discrimination is associated with lower oral proficiency and especially literacy in English ( $r=-0.037$ ,  $p<0.001$  for oral proficiency and  $r=-0.044$ ,  $p<0.001$  for literacy) and discrimination by students at school is associated with lower English language proficiency ( $r=-0.038$ ,  $p<0.001$  for oral proficiency and  $r=-0.037$ ,  $p<0.05$  for literacy). In contrast, discrimination by teachers and counselors is associated with higher oral proficiency in English and especially literacy ( $r=0.032$ ,  $p<0.001$  for oral proficiency and  $r=0.043$ ,  $p<0.001$  for literacy). Perceived

ethnic discrimination has no effect on English language proficiency. Perceived discrimination from any of the sources has no effect on self-reported non-English language proficiency.

#### *Models with non-linguistic and linguistic control variables*

Models 5 through Model 8 test and elaborate the results depicted in Models 1 through 4 by controlling for students' SRAT score. Logically, youth's objective proficiency in English could not decrease after an additional three years at school between 1992 and 1995. Thus, this paper advances two alternative explanations for findings presented in Models 5 through 8: (1) perceived discrimination is associated with youth's *varying perceptions* of their own language proficiency when their actual English proficiency is equal, assuming that those students who received the same SRAT score in 1992 have similar levels of objective English proficiency in 1995; and (2) perceived discrimination is associated with *varying degree of improvement* in English proficiency between 1992 and 1995, assuming that change in language skills varied across individuals even when their scores on 1992 SRAT were equal. The interpretation of the results reported in Models 5 through 8 needs to consider both explanations and their implications.

The analysis shows that the impact of perceived discrimination reported in Models 1 through 4 persists even after controlling for participants' objective English language proficiency. Perceived societal discrimination is associated with lower English language proficiency ( $r=-0.03$ ,  $p<0.001$  for oral proficiency and  $r=-0.034$ ,  $p<0.001$  for literacy). Discrimination by students is associated with lower English language proficiency ( $r=-0.038$ ,  $p<0.001$  for oral proficiency and  $r=-0.037$ ,  $p<0.05$  for literacy). Discrimination by teachers and counselors is associated with higher oral proficiency and especially literacy in English ( $r=0.032$ ,  $p<0.001$  for oral proficiency and  $r=0.042$ ,  $p<0.001$  for literacy).

#### Discussion

This study conceptualizes youth's language development as an integral part of a broader process of adolescents' adaptation to the mainstream English-dominant society. This process is built upon ongoing interactions between adolescents and their families, peers and adults at school and the larger society. The current study investigates the hypothesis that the quality of these interactions may influence

youth's propensity to invest materially and emotionally in their English and non-English languages, and, therefore, may affect their proficiency in English and non-English languages. The findings show that perceived societal discrimination and discrimination by students at school are associated with lower self-reported oral proficiency and literacy in English language. Discrimination by teachers and counselors is associated with higher self-reported oral proficiency and especially literacy in English. Ethnic discrimination has no effect on English language. Perceived discrimination from any of the sources has no effect on self-reported non-English language proficiency.

The results do not support the non-English language learning hypothesis about the positive effect of perceived discrimination on non-English language proficiency. Consistent with the finding by Mesch and colleagues (2008) that perceived discrimination among adolescents from the former Soviet Union in Israel is not associated with the increased preferences for the in-group, the present analysis shows that perceived discrimination is not associated with an increased investment in the non-English language. Even though perceived hostility and oppression can be associated with strengthened ethnic loyalties (Fishman 1966; Rumbaut 1994), the present analysis suggests that these attitudes are not translated into higher or lower non-English language proficiency. In contrast, the findings show that perceived discrimination has a persistent impact on self-reported English language competence.

The findings partially support the English language learning hypothesis about the positive impact of perceived discrimination on English language proficiency. The analysis shows that perceived discrimination by teachers and counselors at school is associated with increased oral proficiency and especially literacy in English. It is possible that students with better English language skills are more sensitive to discrimination by teachers and counselors and this finding is a result of a feedback effect. In that case, however, we would expect stronger positive association of perceived discrimination with oral proficiency rather than literacy. Given the relative sizes of the effects, this paper advances a different argument by focusing on a distinct nature of the relationship between students and teachers and counselors at school.

The relationships between students and adults at school involve multiple discourses; however, the

reference to academic discourse is pervasive (McKay and Wong 1996). In a school context, students have an institutionalized channel to respond to discrimination by teachers and counselors by investing more time and energy into their academic performance, including English language. The immigrant parents may further encourage youth in these attempts. This interpretation is consistent with the findings from previous research about adolescents' more successful adjustment to academic rather than interpersonal stress primarily because the former allows more room for engagement and problem-focused coping than the latter (see Compas et al. 2001 for extensive review). In contrast, there are no clear ways to respond to perceived societal discrimination or personal discrimination by other students, which may result in disengagement and have detrimental impact on adolescents' academic and social development.

Results of the present analysis support the disinvestment hypothesis about the negative impact of perceived discrimination on self-reported English language proficiency. Those adolescents who report societal discrimination and discrimination by schoolmates also report lower oral proficiency and literacy in English language. If youth's self-assessment of language proficiency accurately reflects their objective language skills, then the finding suggests that perceived discrimination hinders improvement in English language proficiency during the high school years. Perceived discrimination discourages or hinders youth's participation in English-dominant school activities and decreases the likelihood of their participation in English-dominant social networks (Fisher et al. 2000; Lippi-Green 1997). This combination of social exclusion and avoidance results in fewer opportunities to practice English in a natural speech environment, with negative consequences for self-reported English language proficiency (Norton Pierce 1995).

If youth's assessment of language proficiency reflects their subjective perceptions rather than the objective language proficiency, then the findings suggest that perceived discrimination has a negative influence on adolescents' level of comfort with their English language skills. Adolescents who feel discriminated against by other students or report perceived societal discrimination, may retreat to using simpler English vocabulary and syntax in an attempt to avoid embarrassment and confusion. This strategy of linguistic avoidance prevents adolescent children of immigrants from mastering the English language

at an advanced level necessary for academic and employment success (Felix 2004; Sinclair 1971). It is also likely that social and linguistic avoidance co-exist and even reinforce one another, having a cumulative negative effect on improvement in English language proficiency over time.

These results have important implications for adolescents' adaptation in U.S. society characterized by increased concerns about possible threats to the dominance of the standard English language. Lippi-Green (1997:64) defines language ideology as "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language" drawn from the language of the upper-middle class and continuously reproduced by dominant social institutions of state, education, and mass media. Language varieties that are not culturally, politically and linguistically mainstream are devalued and their speakers are encouraged and forced to assimilation into English. However, for adolescent children of immigrants, who tend to be bilingual and have a foreign accent, it is a difficult and at times impossible task, further complicated by perceptions of discrimination against them. This combination of perceived discrimination and pressure to assimilate has a marked negative impact on youth's level of comfort with English and their objective English language proficiency, which, in turn, may have a negative influence on adolescents' long-term linguistic and social development.

#### Study Limitations

The current study expands our knowledge about the role of perceived discrimination among socio-demographic explanations of language proficiency among adolescent children of immigrants and raises new questions about the impact of the immediate social environment at school and outside of it. However, several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited to California and Florida. The significant presence of immigrants allows scholars to identify causes and consequences of social adaptation among adolescent children of immigrants and outline implications for a large proportion of population in these two states. However, the findings can not be directly generalized to a large U.S. population. Second, the study relies on cross-sectional analyses. It is critical that future research examines bidirectional relationship between perceived discrimination and language proficiency. Longitudinal data has to be used to tease apart these relationships in order to examine the mechanisms of

influence. Finally, the ideal longitudinal data for this research would include objective measures of literacy, oral proficiency and accentedness as well as self-reported language proficiency, and more elaborated measures of perceived societal discrimination. To approach this ideal, researchers are encouraged to use both quantitative and qualitative data.

### Conclusions

This study used the 1995 Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study data to investigate the association between perceived discrimination and language proficiency. It underscored the need to include the immediate social context in the analysis of linguistic and social development among adolescent children of immigrants. The findings of a negative impact of perceived societal discrimination and discrimination by other students, and of a positive impact of discrimination by teachers and counselors expand our knowledge about possible socio-demographic influences on English language proficiency. These findings highlight the importance of negative immigrant and ethnic stereotypes in schools and in larger society and the complex role of teachers and counselors in adolescents' linguistic and social development. This study calls for design and implementation of policies and programs at schools that would reduce discrimination and increase awareness about emotional, symbolic and material investments that the children of immigrants need to make in order to achieve greater acceptance in English-dominant American society.



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Table 1. Descriptions and Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in the Analysis (N=2862)

Variable	Variable description	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Language proficiency</i>					
English literacy	An average of reading and writing, each ranging from 1 to 4	3.767	0.433	2	4
English oral	An average of listening and speaking, each ranging from 1 to 4	3.851	0.354	1	4
Non-English literacy	An average of reading and writing, each ranging from 1 to 4	2.507	1.039	1	4
Non-English oral	An average of listening and speaking, each ranging from 1 to 4	3.092	0.901	1	4
SRAT score in 1992	Stanford Reading Achievement Test score	671.124	38.563	527	830
<i>Perceived discrimination</i>					
Discriminated by students	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.331	0.470	0	1
Discriminated by adults at school	An additive index equal a sum of discrimination by teachers (1=yes) and counselors (1=yes)	0.252	0.434	0	2
Ethnic discrimination	An additive index equal a sum of discrimination Latinos (1=yes), African Americans (1=yes) and White Americans (1=yes)	0.627	0.913	0	3
Societal discrimination	A composite scale = an average score across three items: “There is racial discrimination in economic opportunities in the U.S.”; “There is much conflict between different racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.”; “Americans generally feel superior to foreigners.”	1.780	0.540	1	4
<i>Individual characteristics</i>					
Age	Age in 1995	17.154	0.836	15	21
Female	1=female, 0 = male	0.528	0.499	0	1
In US less than 8 years	1=In US less than 8 years, 0 = otherwise	0.032	0.176	0	1
In US 9 to 12 years	1=In US 9 to 12 years, 0 = otherwise	0.212	0.409	0	1
In US 13 or more years	1=In US 13 or more years, or native-born, 0 = otherwise	0.756	0.430	0	1
<i>Family Characteristics</i>					
Intact family	1 = participant lives in a household with both biological or adoptive parents, 0 otherwise	0.746	0.435	0	1
Both parents foreign-born	1 = both parents are foreign-born, 0 = otherwise	0.883	0.321	0	1
Family cohesion	A composite scale = an average across three statements: “Family members like to spend time with each other”; Item 2 “Family members feel very close to each other”; Item 3 “Family togetherness is very important”.	3.625	0.995	1	5
Parental education index	A sum of mother's and father's education, each ranging from 1 to 3: 1 = less than high school, 2 = high school graduate, 3 = college graduate.	3.888	1.291	2	6
Mother employed	1 = mother employed at a regular occupation, 0 = otherwise	0.820	0.384	0	1
Father employed	1 = mother employed at a regular occupation, 0 = otherwise	0.692	0.461	0	1
<i>National Origin</i>					
Asia	1 = national origin Asia, 0 otherwise	0.172	0.377	0	1
Caribbean	1 = national origin Caribbean, 0 otherwise	0.037	0.189	0	1
Cuba	1 = national origin Cuba, 0 otherwise	0.230	0.421	0	1
Mexico	1 = national origin Europe, Canada, 0 otherwise	0.136	0.343	0	1
Other Latin America	1 = national origin Middle East, Africa, 0 otherwise	0.201	0.401	0	1
Other	1 = national origin Mexico, 0 otherwise	0.013	0.111	0	1
Philippines	1 = national origin other Latin America, 0 otherwise	0.211	0.408	0	1

Source: CILS 1992 when marked, and CILS 1995 otherwise.

Table 2. Pairwise Correlation Coefficients for Perceived Discrimination Variables and Participant's Score on the Stanford Reading Achievement Test (N=2862)

	Variable Name	1	2	3	4	5
1	Participant's score on the Stanford Reading Achievement Test (1992)	1				
2	Discriminated by students at school (dummy)	0.0389*	1			
3	Discriminated by teachers and / or counselors at school (index)	0.0172	0.3597*	1		
4	Discriminated by Latinos, African American or/and White Americans (index)	.0749*	0.3653*	0.3696*	1	
5	Perceived societal inequality/discrimination (index)	-0.0605*	-0.1826*	-0.1949*	-0.2451*	1

Source: CILS 1992 when marked, and CILS 1995 otherwise.

\* P<.05

Table 3. Regression of Self-reported Language Proficiency on Perceived Discrimination among Adolescent Children of Immigrants

Predictors and Confounding Factors	Self-reported Language Proficiency in 1995				Self-reported Language Proficiency in 1995 controlling for participant's score on the 1992 Stanford Reading Achievement Test			
	Oral Proficiency in English	Literacy in English	Oral Proficiency in non-English	Literacy in non-English	Oral Proficiency in English	Literacy in English	Oral Proficiency in non-English	Literacy in non-English
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Participant's score on the Stanford Reading Achievement Test (1992)					0.002 (7.40)**	0.003 (10.26)**	-0.001 (-1.49)	0 (-0.91)
<b>Perceived Discrimination in 1995:</b>								
Discriminated by students at school (dummy)	-0.038 (-3.52)**	-0.037 (-2.11)*	0.047 (1.23)	0.025 (0.73)	-0.038 (3.43)**	-0.037 (2.32)*	0.047 (1.23)	0.025 (0.73)
Discriminated by teachers and / or counselors at school (index)	0.032 (2.77)**	0.043 (3.89)**	0.040 (1.66)	0.030 (0.94)	0.032 (3.00)**	0.042 (4.04)**	0.04 (1.65)	0.03 (0.94)
Discriminated by Latinos, African American or/and White Americans (index)	-0.009 (-1.25)	-0.007 (-0.67)	-0.013 (-0.60)	-0.003 (-0.17)	-0.015 (-1.96)	-0.016 (-1.54)	-0.011 (-0.52)	-0.002 (-0.11)
Perceived societal inequality/discrimination (index)	-0.037 (-3.93)**	-0.044 (-3.97)**	0.020 (0.78)	-0.011 (-0.49)	-0.030 (-3.23)**	-0.034 (-3.10)**	0.018 (0.69)	-0.012 (-0.54)
<b>Confounding Factors:</b>								
Family characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adolescent's individual characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ethnic origin	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	2862	2862	2862	2862	2862	2862	2862	2862
Model R-Squared	0.22	0.21	0.36	0.42	0.26	0.27	0.36	0.42

Source: CILS 1992, 1995.

t-statistics in parentheses; \* P<.05; \*\* P<.001.

For the purpose of the analysis the data was clustered at school level.

Confounding factors included in all models in this table (Table 3) are:

*Family characteristics:* family cohesion scale, intact family, parental nativity (both parents are foreign-born), parental education index, father employed full-time, mother employed full-time.

*Adolescent's individual characteristics:* age, gender, length of stay in the United States.

*National origin:* Asia, Caribbean, Cuba, Mexico, Other Latin America, Other (Canada, Europe, Middle East, Africa), Philippines (reference category)



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