Effects of Discrimination and Distress on U.S. Latino/a Young Adults’ Relational Uncertainty

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Introduction

• Psychological distress is consequential for the well-being of romantic relationships (e.g., Rahman et al., 2015).
• Latino/a Americans experience frequent minority stressors, such as discrimination, which can exacerbate psychological distress (Killion et al., 2020).
• Psychological distress is related to increased levels of self, partner, and relationship uncertainty (Weger, 2011). When partners display high levels of maintenance, higher scores represented higher values of the measured variables. All measures demonstrated moderate to high reliability (α > .88).

Method

Participants

• N = 462 U.S. Latino/a young adults (M-age = 25.9 years, SD = 2.7; 59.5% male) recruited through MTurk.
• Most participants were born in the United States (83.5%) and reported at least completion of a four-year college degree (63.2%), full-time employment (71.4%), and being in a dating relationship (56.1%), rather than being engaged, married, or in a domestic partnership.

Measures

• Participants rated their experiences of relational uncertainty (adapted from Knobloch & Knobloch, 1999), their partner’s relationship maintenance (Baker et al., 2012), anxiety (GAb-7; Sylaver et al., 2006), depressive symptoms (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), and perceived discrimination (adapted from Wetherell et al., 2003) through an online survey.

Data Analyses

• Following recommendations from Solomon and colleagues (2016), we conducted three hierarchical regression analyses examining the three aspects of relational uncertainty: relationship, self, and partner uncertainty.
• The variable psychological distress was created as a composite of depressive symptoms and anxiety.
• All predictor variables were z-scored across all models.

Results

Self Uncertainty (see Table 1)

• Psychological distress (β = .46, β = .21, p < .05) and perceived discrimination (β = .22, β = .15, p < .05) were positively associated with self uncertainty.
• Relationship maintenance was negatively related to self uncertainty (β = -.20, β = -.13, p < .01).
• Relationship maintenance moderated the effect of psychological distress on self uncertainty (β = .42, β = .19, p < .001), such that individuals low in distress experienced reduced uncertainty when their partner displayed high levels of maintenance.

Partner Uncertainty (see Table 1)

• Psychological distress (β = .58, β = .27, p < .001) was positively associated with partner uncertainty. Discrimination was not significantly related to partner uncertainty.
• Relationship maintenance was negatively associated with partner uncertainty (β = -.23, β = -.16, p < .001).
• Relationship maintenance did not moderate the effects of discrimination or psychological distress on partner uncertainty.

Relationship Uncertainty (see Table 1)

• Psychological distress (β = -.40, β = -.19, p < .01) and perceived discrimination (β = -.30, β = -.20, p < .01) were positively associated with relationship uncertainty.
• Relationship maintenance was negatively related to relationship uncertainty (β = -.21, β = -.14, p < .01).
• Relationship maintenance moderated the effect of psychological distress on relationship uncertainty (β = .34, β = .23, p < .01), such that individuals low in distress experienced reduced uncertainty when their partner displayed high levels of maintenance.

Table 1. Trimmed Hierarchical Regression Models Predicting Self, Partner, and Relationship Uncertainty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Self Uncertainty</th>
<th>Partner Uncertainty</th>
<th>Relationship Uncertainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>β = .00, SE = .02</td>
<td>β = -.01, SE = .01</td>
<td>β = -.01, SE = .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>β = .22, SE = .10</td>
<td>β = .15, SE = .05</td>
<td>β = .19, SE = .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Distress</td>
<td>β = .46, SE = .15</td>
<td>β = .21, SE = .10</td>
<td>β = .19, SE = .10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Maintenance X Self Uncertainty</td>
<td>β = -.20, SE = -.13</td>
<td>β = -.13, SE = -.10</td>
<td>β = -.13, SE = -.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination X Self Uncertainty</td>
<td>β = -.19, SE = -.12</td>
<td>β = -.12, SE = -.09</td>
<td>β = -.12, SE = -.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Maintenance X Partner Uncertainty</td>
<td>β = -.26, SE = -.17</td>
<td>β = -.17, SE = -.12</td>
<td>β = -.17, SE = -.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination X Partner Uncertainty</td>
<td>β = -.06, SE = -.04</td>
<td>β = -.04, SE = -.03</td>
<td>β = -.04, SE = -.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Maintenance X Relationship Uncertainty</td>
<td>β = .22, SE = .12</td>
<td>β = .19, SE = .12</td>
<td>β = .19, SE = .12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination X Relationship Uncertainty</td>
<td>β = .34, SE = .23</td>
<td>β = .22, SE = .19</td>
<td>β = .22, SE = .19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Step 3 for Partner Uncertainty did not create a significant change over Step 2, but is presented for consistency. *p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01, ****p < .001.

Discussion

• The findings that discrimination is associated with increased doubts about a relationship support the Contextual Relational Uncertainty Model (Wegner & Ogan, 2018, suggesting marginalized individuals face increased relational uncertainty in the context of minority stress.
• We extended knowledge of distress, relationship maintenance, and relational uncertainty to Latino/a individuals.

Implications

• The findings that discrimination and distress promote doubts about a relationship bring attention to the broader sociopolitical context. Family life educators and therapists can use this information to assist clients in externalizing their problems, allowing partners to work in tandem to reduce uncertainty (Frost, 2011).

Limitations and Future Directions

• This study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Future studies should examine changes in relational uncertainty over time to determine if these effects hold over time or to assess the temporal ordering of distress, relationship maintenance, and relational uncertainty. Additionally, future research can examine the interaction of relationship maintenance and discrimination in predicting relational uncertainty, as this interaction approached significance in our sample.
• Future research should seek to understand relationship processes for those high in distress by identifying moderators of the role of distress in relational uncertainty, such as ethnic identity, dyadic coping, or relationship commitment.