

The Impact of Acculturation on Asian American Youth and Young Adult Substance Use

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Introduction

Substance use remains prominent in youth and young adult populations, including those who are Asian American (AA). Often, national surveys find that AAs exhibit lower rates of substance use than other groups—for example, only 4.8% of AAs have a substance use disorder, compared to an overall rate of 7.4% among the total population (Kaliszewski, 2024), disaggregation of this data reveals significant variation between subpopulations and under-reported high risk populations. Acculturation, or the degree to which a member of an ethnic group is assimilated into another culture (i.e. ‘Americanization’), uniquely shapes the risk and protective factors for substance use behaviors of AA youth and young adults, yet the impact of this factor is frequently overlooked. My project seeks to analyze existing research into the impact of acculturative factors on the substance use behaviors of Asian Americans from ages 12 to 25.

Methodology

I searched online databases for articles using the keywords “acculturation,” “Asian American,” “youth,” “young adult,” and “substance use.” I selected articles to analyze from those that were publically available, from the past 20 years, taking place in North America, in English, and peer reviewed, ending with a total of 9 articles published between 2008 and 2022 to analyze. I noted the design, sample, intended outcome, and method of indexing acculturation of each study, while summarizing findings pertaining to acculturation and cultural identity and any special factors such as gender that influence use.

Implications

My findings are consistent with the existing research showing a positive correlation between acculturation and a greater likelihood of substance use, and corroborates an alternative perspective on the meaning of this correlation. The given analysis of how acculturation is related to substance use may open up an alternative way of screening for substance use risk in AAYYA, using indicators of acculturation instead. Of course, more research is needed to confirm the validity of this analysis. This paper was based on the analysis of only nine papers, so a larger scale review is likely the next step. Further research into if or how gender impacts substance use, or how it is related to acculturation, is also needed.

Literature Cited

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Findings

Abbreviated Summary of Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Evidence about Acculturation				
Author, Year	Setting	Study Period	Design and Sample	MVF (Most Valuable Finding)
Nguyen, 2014	Southern California	Not stated	Semi-structured interviews	Interviewees emphasized the effect of peer influence on their use, and discussed cultural identity but did not connect it to their substance use.
Ahmmad & Adkins, 2021	National data set	1994-2021	Secondary analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)	Indicators of acculturation were associated with increased substance use and attenuated many of the observed differences between ethnic groups.
Thai, Connell, & Tebes, 2010	National data set	1994-1995	Secondary analysis of Wave 1 from Add Health	When peer use and academic achievement were considered, acculturation no longer predicted substance use.
Shih et al., 2015	Southern California	Fall 2008 to Spring 2011	Secondary analysis of data from an after-school program	Mixed-heritage adolescents reported the highest frequency of alcohol and cigarette use by their closest adult.
Moloney, Hunt, & Evans, 2008	San Francisco Bay Area	2005-2007	Interviews with Asian American Youth from the SF Bay dance scene	Three types of narratives were used to describe one’s perception of the relationship between their substance use and Asian American identity. One seeing no relationship, one seeing it as a sign of difficulty, and one seeing it as a sign of disconnect.
Le, Goebert, & Wallen, 2009	Oakland, California	Not stated	Secondary analysis of interviews from Le, Monfared, & Stockdale, 2005	For males, individualism increased affiliation with peers who use substances. Collectivism appears to be a particularly protective factor for female substance use.
Bersamira et al., 2022	National data set	May 2002 - November 2003	Secondary analysis of the National Latino and Asian American Survey	Respondents born in the United States had 7.55 times higher odds of past-year substance use compared to foreign born respondents. Being younger was also a predictor of substance use.
Lui & Zamboanga, 2018	31 studies	Studies published from 1979 to 2016	Meta-analysis of 31 studies published in peer-reviewed journals	Found a positive link between acculturation and alcohol use among women, but a negative (sometimes statistically nonsignificant) link among men.
Fang, Barnes-Ceeney, & Schinke, 2011	19 states	August 2007 to March 2008	Surveys given to 11-14 year old Asian girls and their mothers	Using an acculturation index based on language spoken at home and immigration status, no direct relation to drinking was found.

Analysis

The majority of reviewed articles studied an association between acculturation and substance use, and most found a positive association. Two studies offer explanations for ways that acculturation may influence substance use, and one examines differences of patterns and risk factors between Asian subgroups.

Nearly all the studies that examined acculturation indexed it based on different factors. Most studies used a mix of factors regarding language use/proficiency and immigration/residency status (Ahmmad & Adkins, 2021; Thai et al., 2010; Bersamira et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2011). Le et al. (2009) examined individualism-collectivism and acculturative dissonance as indicators of acculturation.

Acculturation as a Risk Factor

The findings of Le et al. (2009) are particularly interesting when also considering Thai et al. (2010) and Fang et al. (2011). Rather than acculturation — measured with objective variables such as length of residence in the US or language use at home—directly resulting in a greater risk for substance use in Asian American youth and young adults, greater acculturation may instead be strongly correlated with other risk factors, like peer use,

academic achievement, and individualism. Then, acculturation may not be a risk factor itself, but rather a predictor of higher risk populations. Acculturation is still a useful measure even when taking this perspective: measuring acculturation through objective measures, such as length of residence, may be more reliable and accessible for identifying higher risk groups than methods for identifying other risk factors such as peer use.

Gender Differences

Of note are the multiple studies finding differences in how acculturation differently affected male and female populations. Le et al. (2009) found collectivism, a trait more common in those less acculturated, served as a particularly protective factor for female substance use, while individualism increased affiliation with peers who use substances in men. Lui & Zamboanga (2018) found a positive link between acculturation and alcohol use in women, but a negative and sometimes statistically nonsignificant link in men. Contrasting those findings, Fang et al. (2011) found no link between acculturation and drinking in a population of adolescent Asian girls. The inconsistency of these findings suggest a need for more research regarding how acculturation uniquely affects those of different genders.



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