Cross-border ties as sources of risk and resilience for Latino migrants in the US

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**Introduction**

Sociologists interested in the integration of new immigrant populations in the United States (U.S.) have long observed how these groups continue to connect with family and friends in their communities of origin, as well as processes by which these ties are weakened or changed as immigrants settle into destination communities (Handlin 1951; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-1919 (1996)). Nevertheless, immigrant health research has only recently begun to examine how cross-border ties might influence the health outcomes of immigrant populations, even long after arrival and settlement in the US (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2012). These studies have found that cross-border ties may have both negative and positive influences on mental health (Alcántara, Chen and Alegria 2014), health behaviors (Alcántara, Molina and Kawachi 2014), and overall health status (Torres 2013). We expand on findings of significant associations between cross-border social ties and the well being of immigrants by looking at whether or not cross-border ties moderate the association between migration-related stressors and psychological distress for a nationally representative sample of Latino immigrants in the US. We additionally present preliminary findings testing mediators of the main-effect association between cross-border ties and psychological distress.

**Conceptual Framework**

Our framework brings concepts related to social ties and health together with contributions from the literature on transnationalism and immigrant adaptation to help theorize why cross-border social ties might impact mental health, and why they might moderate the impact of migration-related stressors. Within this framework, we propose several countervailing factors that link cross-border social ties to both lower and higher levels of psychological distress, and may support our hypotheses that 1) cross-border connection may buffer the adverse impact of migration-related stressors on migrant health and 2) that cross-border separation may exacerbate the adverse impact of migration-related stressors on migrant health.

Specifically, cross-border social ties may contribute to a sense of support or belonging within a family, community, or broader ethno-national group above and beyond social ties that immigrants engage with in the US that may lead to greater well-being, and potentially mitigate some of the adverse mental health effects of discrimination and other immigration-related stressors. Cross-border social ties may support bilingualism or biculturalism among immigrants who are simultaneously acculturating to their social networks and communities in the U.S., and may strengthen a sense of ethnic identity that is protective of mental health. Finally, remittance sending may also serve to support mental well being among immigrants by way of realizing one's role within the transnational family and serving as an indicator of having achieved the intended purpose of migration for many migrants to the US: improving financial and material conditions back home.

On the other hand, cross-border social ties also connote cross-border separation. It is possible that limited contact with family and friends, potentially due to political or financial barriers to making visits abroad, is associated with increased psychological distress through mechanisms of elevated social isolation and/or reduced family cohesion. This may be

particularly acute for migrants who are separated from close family members, including spouses and children. It may also be possible that cross-border ties are associated with elevated psychological distress given the potential for financial and social strain if family members abroad are economically dependent on migrant members or face stressful life events such as illness or job loss.

## Data and Measures

We will use data from the 2002/2003 National Latino and Asian American Survey (NLAAS), a nationally representative, cross-sectional survey of Latinos living in US that includes 1630 Latino immigrant respondents. While the survey is over a decade old, the NLAAS is unique in its inclusion of measures of cross-border social ties and health outcomes. Given the unique historical and political context of each migrant sub-group (Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican, "other" Latino), all models are stratified by these groups.

The dependent variable is a continuous measure of psychological distress, indicated by the 13-item Kessler scale. Measures of migration-related stress come from a 9-item sub-scale of the Hispanic Stress Inventory. A principal components analysis suggests that these items load onto 3 factors: 1) family-related stress (e.g. limited contact with family and friends in country of origin); 2) migration-related discrimination (e.g. difficult to find work due to Latino descent); and 3) legal status stressors (e.g. avoid health services due to fear of deportation). Our two indicators of respondents' cross-border social ties are: 1) whether or not they send money back to their relatives in their countries of origin and 2) whether or not they report difficulty visiting their family and friends in their country of origin.

Using these measures, we estimate generalized linear models of psychological distress (gamma family, log link) on migration-related stressors and cross-border ties, then subsequently test for significant interaction terms between migration-related stress and measure of cross-border ties. These interaction analyses follow the Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs) presented in Figure 1. Fully adjusted models control for age, gender, educational attainment, self-reported economic status, marital status, citizenship status and years in the U.S.

## Results

Sending remittances is associated with lower levels of psychological distress only for the Mexican and Cuban migrant samples in adjusted models: sending remittances is associated with 12% lower distress scores (exp(b): 0.88, 95% CI: 0.80, 0.98) for Cuban migrants and 6% lower distress for Mexican migrants (exp(b): 0.94, 95% CI: 0.90, 0.98). Difficulty visiting home is associated with 15% greater distress scores for Puerto Rican migrants only (exp(b): 1.15, 95% CI: 1.05, 1.26). Table 1 presents the adjusted interactions between dimensions of immigration-related stress and cross-border ties according to the DAGs presented in Figure 1. Among Puerto Rican migrants, remittance sending reduced the association between immigration-related discrimination and psychological distress by 25% (exp(b): 0.75, 95% CI: 0.57, 0.99). Among Cuban migrants, remittance sending reduced the association between legal status fear and psychological distress by 30% (exp(b): 0.70, 95% CI: 0.61, 0.78).

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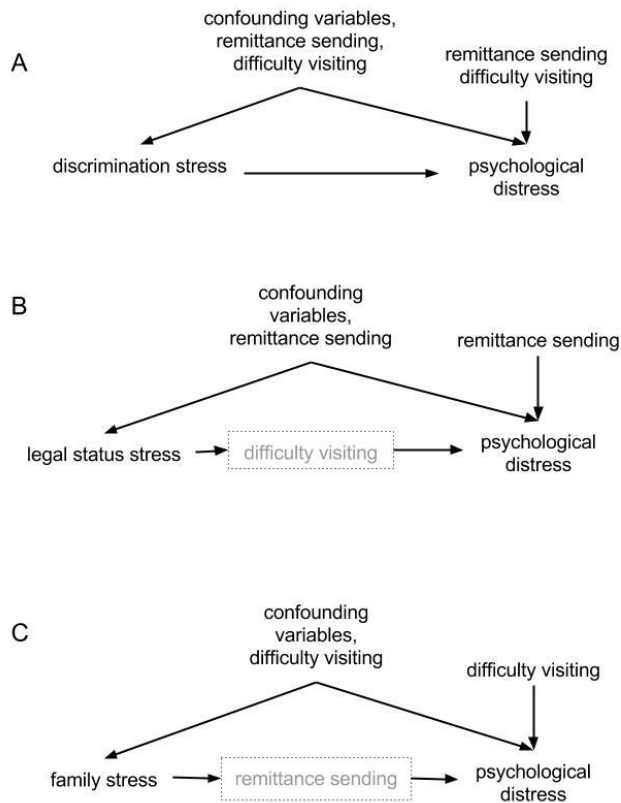
Figure 1. Directed Acyclical Graphs (DAGs) of relationships between immigration-related stress, cross-border ties, and psychological distress

Table 1. Exponentiated coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from adjusted generalized linear models of psychological distress including main effects and interaction terms between cross-border ties and immigration-related stress.[a]

| | Puerto Rican (n=217) | | | Cuban (n=501) | | | Mexican (488) | | | Other Latino (n=424) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Exp (b) | | 95% CI | Exp (b) | | 95% CI | Exp (b) | | 95% CI | Exp (b) | | 95% CI |
| **Model A[b]** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Discrimination | 1.21 | * | (1.01, 1.47) | 1.09 | | (0.95, 1.26) | 1.07 | | (0.92, 1.24) | 1.08 | | (0.92, 1.27) |
| Remittances | 1.01 | | (0.87, 1.18) | 0.95 | | (0.83, 1.09) | 1.02 | | (0.94, 1.11) | 1.01 | | (0.85, 1.21) |
| Difficulty visiting | 1.06 | | (0.87, 1.25) | 1.03 | | (0.91, 1.16) | 1.05 | | (0.90, 1.22) | 1.06 | | (0.86, 1.30) |
| Remittances*discrimination | 0.75 | * | (0.57, 0.99) | 0.88 | | (0.87, 1.25) | 0.92 | | (0.80, 1.06) | 0.98 | | (0.84, 1.14) |
| Difficulty visiting*discrimination | 1.16 | | (0.88, 1.54) | 1.21 | | (0.74, 1.05) | 0.99 | | (0.80, 1.22) | 1.01 | | (0.82, 1.26) |
| **Model B** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Legal status stress | -- | | -- | 1.36 | * | (1.24, 1.50) | 1.12 | * | (1.01, 1.25) | 1.20 | | (0.94, 1.13) |
| Remittances | -- | | -- | 0.96 | | (0.88, 1.05) | 0.98 | | (0.91, 1.05) | 1.03 | | (0.93, 1.55) |
| Remittances*legal status stress | -- | | -- | 0.69 | *** | (0.61, 0.78) | 0.95 | | (0.83, 1.10) | 0.90 | | (0.68, 1.19) |
| **Model C** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Family stress | 1.06 | | (0.91, 1.24) | 1.07 | | (0.93, 1.23) | 1.10 | | (0.99, 1.22) | 1.16 | | (0.98, 1.36) |
| Difficulty visiting | 1.29 | ** | (1.11, 1.49) | 1.05 | | (0.95, 1.15) | 1.10 | | (0.98, 1.23) | 1.13 | | (0.95, 1.35) |
| Family*difficulty visiting | 0.86 | | (0.64, 1.16) | 0.97 | | (0.79, 1.20) | 0.89 | | (0.78, 1.02) | 0.84 | | (0.66, 1.07) |

Source: National Latino and Asian American Study. Note:*p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001. Note: a. Controlling for age, gender, educational attainment, self-reported economic status, marital status, citizenship status and years in the U.S. b. Models correspond to directed acyclic graphs (DAGs) in Figure 1.