

## Article

# The Associations Between Culture-Related Stressors and Prosocial Behaviors in U.S. Latino/a College Students: The Mediating Role of Cultural Identity

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**Abstract:** U.S. Latino/a college students face distinct stressors, including acculturative stress and enculturative stress, impacting their capacity to engage in prosocial behaviors (voluntary actions benefiting others). Cultural stress can deplete resources essential to engaging in altruistic acts (selflessly motivated helping), yet it can also stimulate selfishly motivated prosocial behaviors. The present study examines how cultural adjustment stressors and cultural identity relate to prosocial behaviors among U.S. Latino/a college students. A sample of 1450 U.S. Latino/a college students (M age = 19.7 years; SD = 1.61; 75.4% women) completed an online survey assessing their levels of enculturative and acculturative stress, ethnic and U.S. identity, and altruistic and public prosocial behaviors. A path analysis revealed that higher enculturative stress is associated with lower ethnic identity, which, in turn, predicts increased public prosocial behaviors. Conversely, acculturative stress is linked with higher ethnic identity, leading to elevated public prosocial behaviors. The discussion underscores the importance of mitigating culture-related stress that can stem from home and U.S. society to enhance the well-being of U.S. Latino/as.

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**Keywords:** cultural stress; ethnic identity; prosocial behaviors

## 1. Introduction

Latino/as make up 19.5% of the U.S. population and contributed 70% of its growth between 2022 and 2023, highlighting their growing social impact [1]. Many Latino/a young adults are either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrant parents, navigating a bicultural context where they must balance their heritage culture with the norms and expectations of U.S. society [2,3]. Latino/as who integrate behaviors, values, and traditions from their family's cultural background while engaging with the United States' cultural norms can function effectively in both contexts [4]. This process often exposes Latino/a college students to cultural stressors, which can hinder their ability to engage in positive social interactions, including prosocial behaviors [5–7]. Prosocial behaviors are a marker of positive development and are important for building and maintaining relationships [8]. Cultural stress can disrupt this process by causing internal discomfort that undermines their capacity to help others [6]. Students experiencing cultural stress might feel that they do not fully fit into a cultural group. They might feel “too American” for their cultural community or “too ethnic” for U.S. mainstream groups. Stress from balancing the

expectations to maintain connections to their cultural roots while also adapting to U.S. societal rules can impact their ability to help others [9,10].

Previous work on culture-related stressors shows that acculturative stress and discrimination are linked to maladjustment among Latino/a youth [10–15]. However, solely focusing on negative outcomes and overlooking strengths creates a deficit perspective of U.S. Latino/a youth development [6,16–18]. Theoretical models of stress and coping suggest individuals' interpretation of stressful situations can impact their ability to cope [19–21]. Additionally, cultural scholars have shown that acculturative stress and discrimination foster developmental competencies, such as emotion reappraisal, sympathy, and ethnic identity, fostering prosocial behaviors [6]. While enculturative stress is far less researched, stress from family pressures to uphold cultural traditions might play a similar role in shaping social cognitions, such as cultural identity.

Prosocial behaviors encompass helping actions motivated by different factors [8]. Latino/as might engage in altruistic and public prosocial behaviors to navigate cultural expectations and build social connections in new environments [22]. Altruistic prosocial behaviors, which involve helping others with little expectation of personal gain, can support social adjustment for Latino/a students facing cultural transitions. Public prosocial behaviors, helping actions performed in the presence of others for social recognition, might also aid in their integration [8].

The association among cultural stress and prosocial behaviors might be mediated by cultural identity. Experiencing acculturative or enculturative stress prompts U.S. Latino/a college students to strengthen their cultural identity. Acculturative stress associated with conflicts in adopting the mainstream culture might lead students to affirm their ethnic identity and connect more deeply with their ethnic cultural group [23–25]. Similarly, enculturative stress, such as family pressures to maintain ethnic cultural traditions, might encourage students to adopt U.S. mainstream values to succeed in U.S. normed environments [26,27]. These cultural tensions can prompt students to redefine their identity in ways that foster prosocial engagement. The present study explores how Latino/a students turn these cultural challenges into opportunities for personal growth and community involvement.

The present study aims to expand on the existing knowledge by investigating the role of acculturative and enculturative stress in predicting altruistic and public prosocial behaviors among U.S. Latino/a college students. Furthermore, it examines the mediating roles of U.S. and ethnic identity to better understand how these students draw upon their cultural identities to navigate challenges and foster prosocial engagement.

### *1.1. Acculturative Stress, Enculturative Stress, and Prosocial Behavior*

Acculturation involves adapting to a new cultural environment, often requiring changes in behavior, values, and identity [9]. For U.S. Latino/a youth, this process may include learning a new language, adopting different social norms, and balancing the expectations of U.S. American culture with their cultural heritage [28]. In contrast, enculturation focuses on learning and preserving one's original cultural norms and values [9]. Latino/a youth are enculturation through cultural traditions, language, and maintaining strong connections to their heritage. Enculturation, facilitated by families and communities, plays a key role in fostering cultural pride and belonging, which can buffer against stressors but also generate tension in other contexts [29–31]. Individuals engage in processes that balance cultural maintenance and integration, highlighting the complexities of living between cultures [32].

Acculturative stress arises from the psychological challenges of adapting to a new culture, such as marginalization, language barriers, and value conflicts [33–36]. In the United States, immigrants and ethnic minorities experience pressure to conform to U.S.

American societal norms, including speaking English, social customs, and values, which conflict with their cultural backgrounds. Various studies have found that these stressors are linked to internalizing symptoms, including depression and anxiety [10–15,37–39].

Enculturative stress is another form of stress experienced by U.S. Latino/as that has been associated with negative psychological adjustment [40–45]. For U.S. Latino/as, enculturative stress describes stressors associated with the overwhelming demands from their family to speak Spanish and participate in traditions of their ethnic culture [34,46]. Latino/a youth fear being accused of “acting White” by members of their own ethnic group who resist adopting the dominant culture’s expectations [42]. These stressors have been associated with depression symptoms and limited emotion regulation skills [43–45].

Research suggests growth and resilience can emerge from experiences of adversity, despite the draining effects of stress on cognitive and emotional resources [47,48]. Staub and Vollhardt [48] introduced the concept of “altruism born of suffering”, which highlights how individuals who have endured hardship develop a heightened motivation to help others. Stressful experiences can sometimes enhance emotional sensitivity and empathy, fostering greater concern for the well-being of others [6]. These experiences may also lead to adaptive coping mechanisms that can strengthen cognitive and emotional competencies, increasing one’s capacity to engage in prosocial actions [6]. Moreover, helping others during or after adversity can foster a sense of self-efficacy and generate positive emotions, contributing to personal well-being [20].

Prosocial behaviors, actions intended to benefit others, serve as adaptive responses to acculturative and enculturative stressors [6,49]. These behaviors are multidimensional, shaped by factors such as motives (selflessness versus selfishness), contexts (situational pressures), and targets (relationships with family, friends, or strangers)[8]. Acculturative and enculturative stress influence how individuals navigate social interactions and engage in helping behaviors. Within this framework, altruistic (selfless) and public (selfish) prosocial behaviors highlight distinct ways individuals contribute to others’ well-being, encompassing both personal and community-oriented actions.

Altruistic prosocial behaviors, characterized by selfless actions that prioritize others’ needs, can foster resilience and provide a sense of purpose. In contrast, public prosocial behaviors, performed in front of others to gain social approval or status, may facilitate integration into new cultural environments. These behaviors, shaped by cultural mechanisms such as empathy, moral values, and familism, help U.S. Latino/a youth balance cultural maintenance and integration while adapting to the complexities of living between cultures [22,48,50].

Stressed young adults may lack the emotional and cognitive resources to engage in high-cost, selfless altruistic behaviors, especially when these actions do not provide immediate personal benefits [6]. Instead, engaging in low-cost, visible forms of public prosocial behavior can elicit positive social responses and reinforcement from others, serving as an adaptive strategy for social interaction [6]. Altruistic prosocial behaviors have been positively linked with sympathy and negatively with aggressive behaviors, reflecting their foundation in empathy and moral reasoning. In contrast, public prosocial behaviors are positively associated with physical aggression and negatively associated with sympathy, indicating their more superficial or situationally motivated nature [51]. These distinctions highlight diverse strategies for social adaptation including altruism fostering emotional connectedness and meaningful relationships, while public prosocial behaviors provide immediate social recognition and support.

Research on U.S. Latino/a college students has shown that higher levels of acculturative stress are negatively linked to altruistic behaviors and positively linked to several other forms of prosocial behaviors [6]. Similarly, longitudinal research on U.S. Latino/a adolescents showed that discrimination (a component of acculturative stress) was negatively associated

with altruistic prosocial behaviors but positively associated with public prosocial behaviors [6]. Collectively, these studies indicate that acculturative stress is more detrimental to altruistic prosocial behaviors than to other forms of prosocial behaviors. Moreover, acculturative stress might foster low-cost, selfishly motivated public prosocial behaviors. Currently, there are no studies on the links between enculturative stress and prosocial behaviors; however, we expect that enculturative stress will be negatively associated with altruistic behavior and positively related to public prosocial behavior.

### *1.2. Cultural Stress, Ethnicity, and U.S. Identity*

Cultural stress can shape the cultural identity of Latino/a college students based on the stress source, whether acculturative or enculturative. Social identity is shaped and activated by situational cues and group salience, such as cultural or familial expectations, alongside a strong and positive attachment to a group [52]. This activation influences how individuals navigate dual cultural identities and adopt behaviors aligned with group norms and values. U.S. Latino/as who experience acculturative stress from the pressure to acculturate to the U.S. might strengthen their connection with their ethnic cultural group to receive positive social support [40,41,45,53]. Conversely, students who experience overwhelming demands from their families (enculturative stress) to retain their ethnic native language and values might align more with a U.S. identity [29].

Ethnic identity describes an individual's sense of belonging and commitment to their ethnic group [54]. Additionally, it includes efforts to engage with their cultural group by learning about its history and participating in its language and traditional practices [54]. Similarly, U.S. identity consists of exploring and committing to defining oneself with the United States [26,27]. Latino/a college students can simultaneously embrace ethnic and U.S. mainstream identities, contingent upon their efforts to establish and maintain these connections. Latino/as who can balance the expectations of their ethnic group and the mainstream culture are better adjusted [36,55]. Moreover, failing to align oneself to one cultural identity does not necessarily entail having a closer orientation to the other culture. Considering that U.S. Latino/a young adults differ in how much they embrace their ethnic and U.S. identity, it is important to examine how cultural stress is linked to both forms of cultural identity separately.

Acculturative stress might be positively associated with ethnic identity but negatively associated with the U.S. majority identity. In response to the pressure to acculturate to the U.S. majority culture, Latino/a college students strengthen their connection to their ethnic identity to receive support from their ethnic cultural group [45,53]. Fostering a sense of belonging and cultivating a positive perception of one's ethnic group can enhance ethnic identity and effective stress management. Ethnic identity in U.S. Latino/as can serve as a buffer against the negative effects of acculturative stress on psychological well-being [6]. U.S. Latino/a young adults with a secure ethnic identity are better equipped to navigate discrimination and engage in prosocial behaviors.

Conversely, Latino/a young adults who experience acculturative stress might be less motivated to endorse a U.S. identity. Pressure to acculturate to the U.S. could imply that ethnic practices are less valued by U.S. social institutions, suggesting that minorities should adapt to the dominant culture to integrate [56]. Acculturative stress can create challenges for Latino/as to identify with a nation that has marginalized their group. Latino/as might be aware that adopting a U.S. identity can reinforce inequality by marginalizing certain groups, while preserving advantages for others, especially the White majority. One study showed that Latino/as experiencing heightened levels of group discrimination reported low levels of national identity [56].

Enculturative stress might also predict how U.S. Latino/a college students form their ethnic and U.S. identity. U.S. Latino/a college students who experience overwhelming

demands from their family to retain their ethnic language and traditions might be less likely to endorse their ethnic identity [57]. For some students, this pressure can feel at odds with their experiences and the cultural norms they encounter in a U.S. college environment, where they are exposed to diverse perspectives, including more individualistic values and mainstream U.S. American cultural practices.

Moreover, enculturative stress and American identity might be positively associated. As U.S. Latino/a college students experience stress related to family expectations to retain ethnic traditional cultural practices, they simultaneously feel a stronger pull toward identifying with U.S. majority culture. Differences in acculturation levels between foreign-born parents and U.S.-born young adults can lead to family conflict, particularly when parents strongly encourage their children to uphold traditional ethnic values [34]. The experience of enculturative stress can prompt some students to explore and adopt aspects of U.S. identity to cope with or balance the pressures of their heritage culture. These challenges can lead students to embrace or strengthen their U.S. identity, fostering a sense of belonging and self-definition within the majority culture. Compared to acculturative stress, the link among enculturative stress and cultural identity has received much less attention. Further research is needed to better understand how enculturative stress influences the development of ethnic and U.S. identities, particularly in navigating the complex cultural demands faced by U.S. Latino/a college students.

### *1.3. Cultural Identity and Altruistic and Public Prosocial Behaviors*

Ethnic and U.S. identities are cultural mechanisms that might predict altruistic and public prosocial behaviors. Individuals' values, beliefs, and sense of belonging are greatly influenced by their cultural identities, which also affect their inclination to act in ways that advance the welfare of others [55,58].

Ethnic identity might be positively related to altruistic and public prosocial behaviors. Cultural scholars assert that Latino/a populations develop their ethnic identity through the socialization of their ethnic group, which typically emphasizes interconnectivity, respect, and support for family [8,58,59]. It is likely that U.S. Latino/a young adults internalize aspects of their ethnic identity and perform behaviors that align with their values [60].

Research on the relations between ethnic identity and altruistic prosocial behaviors has yielded mixed results. Some studies found no direct link between ethnic group attachment and altruistic prosocial behaviors [22,60]. Knight et al. observed that adolescents with higher ethnic identity in seventh grade demonstrated greater altruistic prosocial tendencies by tenth grade, but also identified an indirect negative pathway where ethnic identity predicted familism values, which were negatively associated with altruistic prosocial behaviors [58]. Familism, which prioritizes family support, reduces purely selfless helping behaviors. Similarly, Streit et al. found that while ethnic identity showed no direct relations with altruistic prosocial behaviors, familism values, closely linked to ethnic identity, were negatively associated with altruistic tendencies [60]. These findings suggest that the relations among ethnic identity and altruistic prosocial behaviors depend on the interplay among cultural values, such as familism, and ethnic identity, highlighting the need for further research to clarify these associations.

Moreover, it is expected that greater endorsement of ethnic identity will be positively associated with public prosocial behaviors. Ethnic identity is often associated with cultural values emphasizing community-oriented principles like responsibility, interconnectivity, and accountability [22,58,60]. These values encourage helping that would be recognized by others, such as helping someone in a public setting. Research suggests ethnic group attachment strengthens the internalization of familism values, which then predicts public prosocial tendencies [22].

It is possible that Latino/as who endorse a U.S. identity report low levels of altruistic prosocial behaviors and higher levels of public prosocial behaviors. U.S. mainstream values usually endorse self-oriented principles, material success, and personal achievement [58]. In a context that values individual accomplishment, individuals who identify with U.S. cultural norms are more inclined to engage in helping behaviors that are visible to the public and contribute to personal success [8]. Along the same lines, U.S. principles such as prioritizing personal freedom and self-reliance can diminish one's motivation to engage in helping or volunteering if they do not personally benefit from it. Individuals who identify with their U.S. mainstream identity might be less inclined to engage in altruistic prosocial behaviors if it is perceived as diverting time and resources away from personal goals. Research suggests that prioritizing U.S. mainstream values, such as material success and personal achievement, is associated with increased public prosocial behaviors but decreased altruistic ones [58].

Although prior research has examined how acculturative and enculturative stress is associated with cultural identity and prosocial behaviors, several gaps remain. Studies have largely focused on the negative psychological effects of cultural stress, overlooking how these stressors might also foster competencies like ethnic and U.S. identity, which could shape prosocial behaviors [58,60]. The mixed findings on the relations among ethnic identity and altruistic prosocial behaviors underscore the need for further research to clarify these associations [58,60]. Similarly, little is known about how enculturative stress specifically impacts prosocial behaviors, as much of the literature has focused on acculturative stress [9,43,45]. Additionally, while cultural identity and values have been linked to public prosocial behaviors, the mechanisms underlying these associations remain unclear [58]. Research suggests that ethnic identity might encourage both altruistic and public prosocial behaviors, but the role of U.S. identity in shaping these behaviors, particularly in response to cultural stress, has received limited attention [8,55]. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the complex interplay among cultural stress, ethnic and U.S. identity, and prosocial behaviors in U.S. Latino/a college students.

#### *1.4. Study Hypotheses*

To better understand how these forms of cultural stress influence prosocial behaviors, this study addresses two key questions:

1. How do acculturative and enculturative stresses relate to public and altruistic prosocial behaviors among U.S. Latino/a college students?
2. How do ethnic and U.S. identities mediate the relations between acculturative and enculturative stress and prosocial behaviors among U.S. Latino/a college students?

Based on previous research on acculturative stress and discrimination, we hypothesized that high acculturative and enculturative stress levels would negatively predict altruistic prosocial behaviors [6]. Regardless of the source, young adults experiencing high levels of cultural stress might be less inclined to engage in high-cost, selfless helping behaviors if they do not see a personal benefit. Moreover, we also expect that high acculturative and enculturative stress levels will positively predict public prosocial behaviors. Cultural stress can motivate Latino/a college students to engage in low-cost helping behaviors, such as small acts of assistance or visible roles in group settings, to gain social approval, build connections, and reinforce a sense of belonging.

We also hypothesized that high levels of acculturative stress would predict high levels of ethnic identity and low levels of U.S. identity. Latino/a college students facing pressure to adapt to U.S. norms might reinforce their ethnic identity as an act of resistance and strengthen a sense of belonging in their ethnic community [45,53]. Alternatively, we expect acculturative stress to be negatively related to U.S. identity. Overwhelming

pressures to adapt to U.S. cultural norms make it difficult for U.S. Latino/a college students to feel connected to their U.S. identity if they feel that the dominant culture does not respect or represent their values, beliefs, and ways of life.

We hypothesized that enculturative stress would be negatively associated with ethnic identity but positively related to U.S. identity. Enculturative stress might involve feeling obligated to uphold certain family ethnic values, language use, or cultural customs, despite encountering new norms and expectations in their college or mainstream environment. This conflict might lead them to distance themselves from their ethnic identity to reduce tension between the two cultural expectations. Moreover, we expect enculturative stress to strengthen U.S. identity, as individuals align more with the dominant culture to ease cultural tensions.

Based on Knight et al.'s findings, which demonstrated a direct positive association between ethnic identity and altruistic behavior, we hypothesize that ethnic identity will have a positive direct relationship with altruistic prosocial behaviors [58]. Individuals with a stronger ethnic identity might feel a greater obligation to help others. Examining these links can provide further insight into the negative indirect effects mediated by familism values [58,60].

We hypothesize that U.S. identity will negatively predict altruistic prosocial behaviors and positively predict public prosocial behaviors. A strong U.S. identity can orient students toward dominant cultural values of individualism and personal success, making them less inclined toward high-cost altruistic prosocial behaviors. Instead, they favor public prosocial behaviors that gain social approval, helping them integrate, build connections, and gain recognition within mainstream society.

We also hypothesized that cultural identity mediates the relations among cultural stressors and prosocial behavior. We anticipate that acculturative stress will be positively associated with ethnic identity, which will negatively relate to public prosocial behaviors, and positively relate to altruistic prosocial behaviors. When Latino/a college students experience pressure to adapt to mainstream U.S. culture, they might respond by reinforcing their ethnic identity as a form of resistance and self-preservation. A stronger ethnic identity could motivate them to engage in altruistic prosocial behaviors, as they feel a heightened sense of responsibility to support and uplift their ethnic community without expecting recognition. We also expect high acculturative stress to be positively associated with ethnic identity, which, in turn, will positively relate to public prosocial behaviors. Experiencing acculturative stress can lead Latino/a college students to strengthen their ethnic identity as a source of support and solidarity. A stronger ethnic identity can motivate them to engage in public prosocial behaviors that make their cultural community more visible and respected within the broader society.

Acculturative stress will be negatively associated with U.S. identity, which, in turn, will positively relate to public prosocial behaviors and negatively relate to altruistic prosocial behaviors. As students experience acculturative stress, they might feel less connected to or aligned with their U.S. identity. This weakened U.S. identity might lead them to seek approval in the mainstream culture by engaging in public prosocial behaviors, which are visible and might help them feel more accepted.

Enculturative stress will be negatively associated with ethnic identity, which will positively predict public and negative altruistic prosocial behaviors. When students face enculturative stress (the pressure to retain their cultural heritage), they feel conflicted or distanced from their ethnic identity as they struggle to balance family expectations with mainstream norms. This reduced ethnic identity might lead them to engage more in public prosocial behaviors, possibly as a way to find acceptance outside their cultural group. At the same time, a weakened ethnic identity could lower their motivation for altruistic

prosocial behaviors, as these might be seen as more aligned with helping their ethnic community.

Enculturative stress will be positively associated with U.S. identity, which will positively relate to public, and negatively relate to altruistic prosocial behaviors. In response to enculturative stress, students might strengthen their U.S. identity as a way to cope with the pressure to uphold their cultural heritage. This stronger U.S. identity can encourage them to engage in public prosocial behaviors as a way to integrate with the mainstream culture and gain social acceptance. However, a stronger U.S. identity can decrease their inclination toward altruistic prosocial behaviors, particularly if these behaviors are seen as more selfless and directed toward their ethnic community.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Data were collected from the larger Multisite University Study of Identity and Culture (MUSIC) project [61]. Principal investigators of the MUSIC project selected universities intending to represent the Latino/a college student population as best as possible. The sites were distributed across the country (six in the Northeast, seven in the Southeast, six in the Midwest, three in the Southwest, and eight in the West). The representation of Latino/a populations at the universities ranged from 1% to 60% ( $M = 12\%$ ).

The sample included 1450 U.S. Latino/a college students ( $M$  age = 19.51,  $SD = 1.61$ , range: 18–25) who completed measures of enculturative stress, acculturative stress, ethnic identity, U.S. identity, altruistic prosocial behaviors and public prosocial behaviors. Most participants were women (75.4%), consistent with a higher proportion of Latinas attending higher education compared to Latinos [7]. Participants were included if they self-identified as Latino/a in response to a question that asked for their ethnicity by selecting the option “Latino/a, Hispanic, Spanish, Latin American or Spanish Speaking-South American/Caribbean heritage, Other in this category”. The majority of participants were born in the United States (77.5%). Finally, the participants represented a wide range of incomes (28.2% < \$30,000; 25.5% \$30,000–\$50,000; 25.8% \$50,000–\$100,000; and 17.2% > \$100,000).

### 2.2. Procedure

Faculty collaborators at each institution were responsible for coordinating recruitment in classrooms. Participating individuals received a link to the consent form webpage from their instructor via an e-mail or a post on an electronic notification (e.g., course management software). A waiver of signed consent was obtained at each site so that participants could provide consent online. Participants read the consent document and checked a box to indicate that they agreed to participate in the study. Students at each site were offered extra or experiment credit for participating in the study. Students who agreed to participate were sent a link to the consent form and survey packet, which they completed online. All students who completed the survey were given the extra credit offered. The faculty researcher at each data collection site was responsible for obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and for managing all recruitment efforts at their school [61].

### 2.3. Measures

Acculturative and enculturative stress were measured using the Multidimensional Acculturative Stress Inventory (MASI) [34]. Acculturative stress was assessed through a seven-item subscale (e.g., “It bothers me when people pressure me to assimilate to the American ways of doing things”), and enculturative stress was assessed through a four-item subscale (e.g., “I have had conflicts with others because I prefer American customs over Mexican/Latino ones”). Participants responded on a five-point scale ranging from 1



(Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater acculturative or enculturative stress levels. Cronbach's alpha values reported (.86 for acculturative stress and 0.87 for enculturative stress) were calculated based on data from this study. These values reflect the reliability of each subscale within the sample.

Ethnic identity and U.S. identity were measured using scales adapted from the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) [23]. The 12-item ethnic identity scale included "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs". U.S. identity was measured with a 12-item American Identity Scale adapted from the MEIM, including items such as "I have a strong sense of belonging to the United States". Participants responded on a five-point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of ethnic or U.S. identity. Cronbach's alpha for the U.S. identity scale (0.90) was calculated using data from this study, indicating the scale's reliability with this sample.

Prosocial behaviors were assessed using the Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM). We specifically measured altruistic and public prosocial behaviors [8]. From the PTM assessment, two subscales were used: public prosocial behaviors (3 items; "I get the most out of helping others when it is done in front of others") (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81) and altruistic prosocial behaviors (four reverse-coded items; e.g., "I believe that giving goods or money works best when I get some benefit") (Cronbach's alpha = 0.62). Participants reported their prosocial behavioral tendencies on a five-point scale (From 1 = "Does not describe me at all" to 5 = "Describes me greatly"). High scores on each of the PTM scales represent greater levels of public or altruistic prosocial behaviors.

#### 2.4. Analysis Plan

Preliminary analyses, including descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and bivariate correlations, were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) to examine the relations and distributions among cultural stress, cultural identities, and prosocial behaviors. These analyses provided insights into each variable's central tendencies and variability and their interrelations prior to the main analysis.

The main analysis involved conducting path analyses in MPlus to test our hypothesized model [61]. In this model, acculturative and enculturative stress were positioned as predictors of ethnic and U.S. identities, which were, in turn, set to predict public and altruistic prosocial behaviors. Gender and age were included as statistical controls to account for demographic variability within the sample, allowing the analysis to assess the specific effects of cultural stressors on cultural identities and prosocial behaviors without potential confounding from these demographic factors. The predictor, intermediary, and outcome variables were allowed to correlate due to the natural interrelations among these constructs. Model fit indices and indirect effects were examined to evaluate the adequacy of the hypothesized model and the significance of specific pathways. Model fit was determined by Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

The multigroup analysis examined potential differences based on nativity (e.g., U.S.-born vs. foreign-born participants) within the path model. First, two model versions were specified: an unconstrained model, where path coefficients were allowed to vary between the two groups, and a constrained model, where path coefficients were set to be equal across groups. This approach allowed for a comparison of the fit between a model that assumes different relations for each group and one that assumes identical relations. A chi-square difference test was conducted for statistically significant differences between the groups. This test compared the chi-square values of the constrained and unconstrained models. If the difference in chi-square values was significant, it would indicate that the

model paths differ between the two groups. Fit indices, including the CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR, were evaluated for both models.

Finally, we examined the significant indirect effects using maximum likelihood estimation to better understand the role of ethnic and U.S. identities in the links between cultural stressors and prosocial behaviors.

### 3. Results

The preliminary analyses of the main study variables provide insights into the sample's tendencies and distribution shapes for each variable. For acculturative stress, the mean of 2.26 (SD = 0.90) and slight positive skew (skewness = 0.64) suggest that most participants experience low to moderate levels of acculturative stress, with only a small portion reporting higher levels. The near-zero kurtosis (−0.034) indicates a distribution close to normal, implying that there are few extreme values or outliers. Enculturative stress, with a mean of 1.88 (SD = 0.97) and a more pronounced positive skew (skewness = 1.03), shows that most participants experience low levels of this stress, although a few reported higher levels. The positive kurtosis (0.53) suggests a slight tendency toward extreme values, although not enough to heavily impact the analysis.

In terms of cultural identity, both ethnic identity (M = 3.62, SD = 0.84) and U.S. identity (M = 3.83, SD = 0.73) show slight negative skewness (ethnic identity skewness = −0.58, U.S. identity skewness = −0.45), indicating that participants generally score high on these identity measures, with fewer reporting low levels. The kurtosis values (ethnic identity = 0.02, U.S. identity = −0.09) are close to zero, suggesting distribution shapes close to normal for both identity variables. For altruistic prosocial behavior, the high mean of 4.03 (SD = 0.81) and moderate negative skewness (skewness = −0.99) imply that participants typically exhibit high levels of altruistic behavior, with fewer reporting lower levels. The positive kurtosis (0.69) points to a tendency for some extremely high values, though this effect is not severe.

Lastly, public prosocial behavior shows a lower mean of 2.32 (SD = 0.87) and moderate positive skewness (skewness = 0.81), indicating that participants generally report lower levels of public prosocial behavior, with only a few reporting higher levels. The positive kurtosis (0.46) reflects a mild tendency for extremely high values. These skewness and kurtosis values suggest that while most variables approximate a normal distribution, there are some asymmetries. Acculturative and enculturative stress and public prosocial behavior are positively skewed, implying lower levels of these factors among most participants. In contrast, ethnic and U.S. identities and altruistic prosocial behavior are negatively skewed, indicating higher scores in these areas. This distribution pattern suggests that participants tend to have strong cultural identities and high altruistic tendencies but generally experience low to moderate cultural adaptation stress and exhibit relatively low engagement in public prosocial behaviors.

Bivariate correlations were calculated to examine the relations among the main study variables (see Table 1). Acculturative stress was positively associated with ethnic identity ( $r = 0.26, p < 0.001$ ) and negatively associated with U.S. identity ( $r = -0.18, p < 0.001$ ). It also showed a negative association with altruistic prosocial behavior ( $r = -0.18, p < 0.001$ ) and a positive association with public prosocial behavior ( $r = 0.10, p < 0.001$ ). Enculturative stress was negatively correlated with ethnic identity ( $r = -0.09, p < 0.001$ ) and showed no significant relations with U.S. identity ( $r = -0.05$ ). It was negatively associated with altruistic prosocial behaviors ( $r = -0.28, p < 0.001$ ) and positively associated with public prosocial behaviors ( $r = 0.20, p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations for cultural stress, identity, and prosocial behaviors.

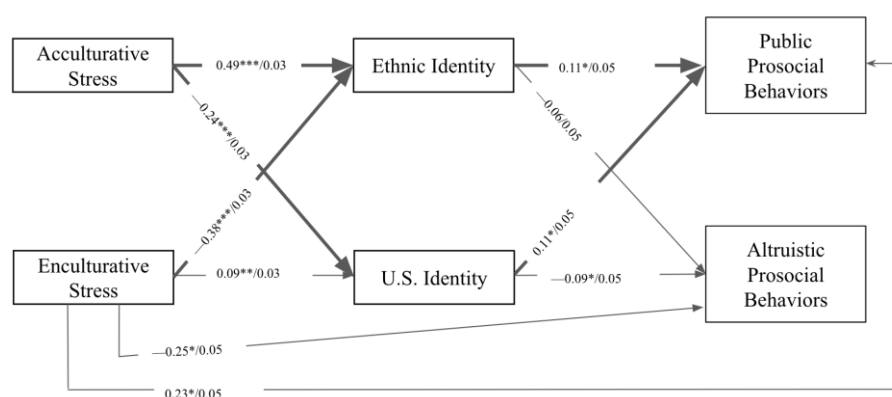
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Acculturative Stress	2.26	0.90	-					
2. Enculturative Stress	1.88	0.97	0.59 **	-				
3. Ethnic Identity	3.62	0.84	0.26 **	−0.09 **	-			
4. U.S. Identity	3.83	0.73	−0.18 **	−0.05	0.20 **	-		
5. Altruistic Prosocial Behavior	4.03	0.81	−0.18 **	−0.28 **	−0.05	−0.11 *	-	
6. Public Prosocial Behavior	2.32	0.87	0.10 *	0.20 **	0.09 *	0.14 **	−0.55 **	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Ethnic identity was positively associated with public prosocial behaviors ( $r = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) but had no significant association with altruistic prosocial behaviors ( $r = -0.05$ ). U.S. identity was positively associated with public prosocial behaviors ( $r = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and negatively associated with altruistic prosocial behaviors ( $r = -0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). These intercorrelations provide insight into the associations among cultural stress, identity, and prosocial behaviors, highlighting distinct patterns of relations among the variables.

### Main Path Analysis

Path analyses were performed in MPlus using maximum likelihood estimation to assess the conceptual model, as shown in Figure 1. Missing data were addressed through full maximum likelihood estimation. The model fit was evaluated based on standard criteria: a good fit is indicated by a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.95 or greater (adequate fit at 0.90 or greater) and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) less than or equal to 0.06 (adequate fit at 0.08 or less). Missing data were managed using maximum likelihood estimation. The model showed a good fit, with  $\chi^2 = 13.31$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.03, and SRMR = 0.02. The path analysis results for the direct effects showed that acculturative stress was not significantly associated with altruistic prosocial behaviors ( $b = -0.018$ ,  $p = 0.75$ ) or public prosocial behaviors ( $b = -0.05$ ,  $p = 0.41$ ). However, acculturative stress positively predicted ethnic identity ( $b = 0.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and negatively predicted U.S. identity ( $b = -0.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).



**Figure 1.** Path model of cultural stress, identity, and prosocial behaviors. Note. The model describes standardized coefficients and standard errors for the associations among acculturative stress, enculturative stress, ethnic identity, U.S. identity, public and altruistic prosocial behaviors. Only significant direct paths are shown, with significant indirect effects highlighted in bold. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Enculturative stress demonstrated a direct, negative association with altruistic prosocial behavior ( $b = -0.25$ ,  $p < 0$ ) and a positive association with public prosocial behavior ( $b = 0.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, enculturative stress was negatively related to ethnic

identity ( $b = -0.38, p < 0.001$ ) and positively related to U.S. identity ( $b = 0.09, p = 0.01$ ). Ethnic identity was positively associated with public prosocial behavior ( $b = 0.11, p = 0.03$ ) and was not significantly associated with altruistic behavior ( $b = -0.06, p = 0.25$ ). U.S. identity was positively associated with public prosocial behavior ( $b = 0.11, p = 0.02$ ) and negatively associated with altruistic behavior ( $b = -0.09, p = 0.05$ ).

The relations among the variables were consistent across the U.S.-born and foreign-born participants, as determined by conducting a multigroup analysis. The fit indices revealed no significant difference between the unconstrained model (CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.04,  $\chi^2(18) = 40.24, p < 0.001$ ) and the constrained model (CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.05,  $\chi^2(30) = 55.50, p = 0.001$ ), with a chi-square difference of  $\Delta\chi^2(12) = 15.26, p = 0.23$ . This similarity in the fit indices suggests that the model paths did not vary significantly between these two groups, supporting the overall stability of the model across nativity.

Next, we examined specific indirect effects using maximum likelihood estimation. The path from acculturative stress to public prosocial behaviors through ethnic identity was significant ( $\beta = 0.05, SE = 0.02, p = 0.03$ ), as was the indirect path through U.S. identity ( $\beta = -0.03, SE = 0.01, p = 0.04$ ). Additionally, the path from enculturative stress to public prosocial behaviors through ethnic identity was also significant ( $\beta = -0.04, SE = 0.02, p = 0.03$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The findings showed that distinct forms of culture-related stress were associated with specific forms of prosocial behaviors in U.S. Latino/a college students. Moreover, culture-related stressors were indirectly related to prosocial behaviors via ethnic and U.S. identity. Such findings extend prior work on the links among cultural stress and prosocial behaviors. The findings are the first to demonstrate the roles of both enculturative and acculturative stress on U.S. Latino/a college students' cultural identity and prosocial behaviors. This study contributes to the increasing literature on positive developmental outcomes among U.S. Latino/a college students, underscoring the need for a paradigm shift towards cultural- and strength-based approaches. The findings have important implications for cultural- and strength-based scientific theories and intervention programs that foster prosocial development in U.S. Latino/a college students.

The findings showed that culture-related stress was associated with specific forms of prosocial behaviors. Enculturative stress was directly and negatively associated with altruistic prosocial behaviors but had a positive association with public prosocial behaviors. The impact of tensions from ethnic cultural expectations on Latino/a college students' prosocial behaviors has yet to be examined. These findings suggest that enculturative stress can mitigate selflessly motivated forms of helping. The stress from upholding cultural values can drain their emotional and cognitive resources, leaving less capacity for purely selfless, altruistic behaviors. However, such stress can also facilitate helping in front of others. This latter form of prosocial behavior might be instrumental for the well-being of U.S. Latino/a college students, particularly when there is a need to gain approval from others in the majority society. These patterns illustrate how cultural challenges can shape prosocial behaviors into more instrumental forms of assistance or support.

Acculturative stress was related to a stronger ethnic identity, but a weaker U.S. identity. These findings yield evidence that exposure to acculturative stress could strengthen their identity with their ethnic heritage but weaken their identity with U.S. society. Strengthening ethnic identity can serve as a source of support and resilience during the acculturation process. It provides individuals with a sense of belonging, continuity, and familiarity in the face of stressors related to adapting to a new cultural context. Similarly to other studies [6,22], acculturative stress was positively associated with ethnic identity.

These results suggest that U.S. Latino/a college students who experience acculturative stress are more motivated to align themselves with their ethnic cultural group to receive support.

The negative association between acculturative stress and a weaker U.S. identity suggests that individuals experiencing high levels of acculturative stress struggle to fully embrace or identify with a culture that has traditionally marginalized and discriminated against them. The links between acculturative stress and U.S. identity are in accordance with previous studies in that greater experience of discrimination is negatively related to U.S. identity [56]. Acculturative stress and discrimination can convince U.S. Latino/a students that their ethnic heritage is incongruent with U.S. mainstream norms and lead them to distance themselves from majority U.S. values and behaviors.

In contrast, enculturative stress was negatively associated with ethnic identity. U.S. Latino/a college students might feel great pressure from their families to retain their ethnic culture. Still, such pressure can be overwhelming and aversive, weakening their connection to their ethnic heritage. These findings are similar to those of Castillo and colleagues who found that ethnic identity was negatively related to enculturative stress [10]. Additionally, enculturative stress was positively related to U.S. identity [10]. Consistent with our hypothesis, pressure to retain ethnic cultural traditions during young adulthood can be too difficult and subsequently lead U.S. Latino/a students to embrace a U.S. identity. More research is needed on the links between ethnic identity and enculturative stress to examine causal directionality.

There were also direct associations between cultural identity and prosocial behaviors, with ethnic identity showing a positive link to public prosocial behaviors but not to altruistic ones. The findings regarding public prosocial behaviors align with some prior studies but differ from others that reported non-significant associations [58,60]. These inconsistencies may partly stem from differences in study design, as cross-sectional studies, like the present one, have identified such relations, while longitudinal research suggests they may diminish over time.

In addition, U.S. identity was positively associated with public prosocial behaviors and negatively associated with altruistic prosocial behaviors. These findings are similar to previous studies that found that Latino/a youth who endorsed U.S. mainstream values were more likely to exhibit public prosocial behaviors but less likely to exhibit altruistic prosocial behaviors [22]. The present study adds to the evidence that U.S. identity endorses self-oriented principles that weaken one's motivation to perform selflessly motivated behaviors. Additionally, U.S. identity predicts more public prosocial behaviors if U.S. Latino/a youth are motivated to gain social approval to succeed in college.

The indirect effect analysis revealed a significant pathway from acculturative stress to public prosocial behaviors mediated by ethnic identity. Latino/a college students experiencing acculturative stress lean more on their ethnic identity as a source of resilience and affirmation. This stronger ethnic identity might motivate them to engage in visible helping behaviors, perhaps to showcase their cultural values or positively represent their community publicly.

Additionally, acculturative stress was negatively associated with U.S. identity, which predicted public prosocial behaviors. The negative association between acculturative stress and a weaker U.S. identity suggests that individuals experiencing high levels of acculturative stress struggle to fully embrace or identify with a culture that has traditionally marginalized and discriminated against them. However, the links between a weaker U.S. identity and more public prosocial behaviors indicate that individuals who do not strongly identify with mainstream U.S. culture still actively engage in prosocial behaviors for social recognition.

Interestingly, enculturative stress was negatively related to ethnic identity, predicting public prosocial behaviors. This finding suggests that stress associated with one's ethnic heritage can also weaken one's affinity and identity with one's native ethnic heritage. Despite the negative relations with enculturative stress, ethnic identity is positively linked to public prosocial behaviors. This relation suggests that even when cultural stress challenges their sense of ethnic belonging, a solid ethnic identity can drive these students to perform prosocial actions that reinforce social connections and foster a positive image.

#### *Study Limitations*

There are various limitations to this study. This study was a cross-sectional research design that limited strong inferences of causality and directionality of the findings. For example, prosocial behaviors affect cultural stress and influence cultural identity. Future research should use longitudinal research designs to infer causality and mediation. Additionally, the measures used in this survey battery were self-report measures, which can introduce self-presentational biases and shared method variance. Although prior research demonstrates the validity of the main measures in the study with U.S. Latino/a youth, future research using multiple methods (e.g., observations or peer reports) is desirable for studies. Finally, this study is limited to a U.S. Latino/a college student sample. Research is needed to examine relations in a broader (e.g., in terms of social class, gender, and sexual minority) sample of U.S. Latino/a youth from specific Latino/a subcultures.

## **5. Conclusions**

Despite these limitations, the present study demonstrates the importance of Latino/a young adults' cultural stressors and cultural identity in predicting prosocial behaviors. This study provides novel findings on the direct negative relations between enculturative stress and ethnic identity. These findings demonstrate that family members' attempts to foster stronger ethnic connections might place undue demands on Latino/a youth and subsequently weaken their ethnic identity. In accordance with previous studies, acculturative stress was associated positively with ethnic identity but was weakly linked to U.S. identity in U.S. Latino/a youth. These links suggest that Latino/a young adults respond to acculturative stress by strengthening their connection to their Latino/a heritage but also pushing back against a connection to U.S. society.

This study also highlighted the significance of cultural identity in the links among both stressors and public prosocial behavior. Both ethnic identity and U.S. identity were able to buffer the adverse effects of stress on public prosocial behaviors. Ethnic or U.S. identity can promote public prosocial behaviors despite experiencing cultural stressors. The findings highlight the importance of reducing exposure to stress from students' ethnic heritage and the U.S. mainstream society. Moreover, because U.S. Latino/a young adults experience both acculturative and enculturative stress, it is essential to strengthen both ethnic and U.S. identity to promote prosocial behaviors. The exploration of positive outcomes not only adds nuance to our comprehension of the effects of cultural stressors on U.S. Latino/a young adults but also expands our understanding of the adaptive capacities of this specific population and contributes valuable insights that can inform more effective and targeted interventions.

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