

Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology

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Online First Publication, February 8, 2024. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000649>

CITATION

Strahm, A. M., Hilmert, C. J., Campos, B., Dvorak, R., & Schenker, M. (2024, February 8). Maternal Blood Pressure and Birth Weight Associations in U.S.-Born and Foreign-Born Latinas. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000649>

BRIEF REPORT

Maternal Blood Pressure and Birth Weight Associations in U.S.-Born and Foreign-Born Latinas

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Objectives: Research suggests that acculturating to the United States is detrimental for immigrants' health. Consistent with this pattern, higher levels of U.S. acculturation among Latina–American women have been associated with giving birth to lower birth weight babies. The mechanisms that shape this shift in pregnancy health are not clear, but researchers have begun to consider the role of physiological systems that are sensitive to social experience. The present study examined the association of cultural orientation with blood pressure (BP) trajectories over the course of pregnancy. **Method:** In a study of 1,011 U.S.- and foreign-born Latina–American women, cultural orientation was assessed and multiple BP measures were collected throughout pregnancy. Postpregnancy data, including gestational age-adjusted birth weight, were extracted from medical records. Bayesian structural equation models examined average BP and slopes of BP change during pregnancy while accounting for psychosocial stress, support, and pregnancy health-related factors (e.g., maternal age, smoking). **Results:** We found evidence that greater U.S. orientation was associated with higher diastolic blood pressure (DBP) and steeper increases in DBP, which was associated with less fetal growth. **Conclusions:** This is the first evidence that BP may mediate the association between cultural orientation and pregnancy outcomes in Latina–American women. These findings advance our understanding of the biopsychosocial pathways through which acculturation to the U.S. links with health. As scholars seek to better understand the influence of U.S. acculturation on health, focusing on the cardiovascular system and other physiological systems that are sensitive to social experience is warranted and likely to prove valuable.

Public Significance Statement

This study reports novel evidence identifying increased blood pressure during pregnancy as a possible reason why Latina–Americans experience increased risk for adverse pregnancy outcomes, particularly lower birth weight, with more U.S. acculturation. Considering cultural orientation and blood pressure of Latina–American women during pregnancy may help identify pregnancies that are at risk for adverse outcomes. Future studies that focus on the nature of the association between U.S. acculturation and higher blood pressure during pregnancy may contribute to the development of targeted interventions that promote healthy pregnancies.

Keywords: pregnancy, U.S. acculturation, Latinas, blood pressure, birth weight

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This publication was made possible by Grants 5RO1 ES09867-03 and P30 ES05707 from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Cooperative Agreement number 1 U50 OH07550.

The authors would also like to express their appreciation to the Obstetrics and Gynecology Group of San Joaquin General Hospital and staff members at the Healthy Beginnings and Community Health clinics affiliated with San Joaquin General Hospital for their cooperation and willingness to let U.S. work alongside of them. Finally, the authors would like to acknowledge the 1,024 Latina women who contributed their time and data to the Study for Hispanic Acculturation, Reproduction, and the Environment study.

Anna M. Strahm, Clayton J. Hilmert, and Belinda Campos contributed equally to this article.

Anna M. Strahm played a supporting role in conceptualization and an equal role in writing—original draft and writing—review and editing. Clayton J. Hilmert played a lead role in conceptualization and an equal role in formal analysis, visualization, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Belinda Campos played an equal role in conceptualization, formal analysis, visualization, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Robert Dvorak played an equal role in formal analysis and visualization. Marc Schenker played a lead role in data curation and funding acquisition.

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In the United States, racial and ethnic minorities experience elevated risk for poorer health than more affluent European Americans (Schwartz & Unger, 2017). In the case of Latinas of recent immigrant heritage, initial favorable pregnancy outcomes worsen and social ties that are protective for health appear to weaken with more time in the United States (Callister & Birkhead, 2002; Zambrana et al., 1997). These changes toward worsening health are frequently attributed to acculturation, a process broadly defined as the adaptation to a culture that is new or unfamiliar. The complexities of acculturation are becoming better understood (Niño & Hearne, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2010; Schwartz & Unger, 2017), but mechanisms through which acculturation is linked with health, including pregnancy outcomes, are not well studied. Researchers have begun to consider the role of physiological systems that are sensitive to social experience in the link between U.S. acculturation and poorer health (D'Anna-Hernandez et al., 2012; Schwartz & Unger, 2017) including blood pressure (BP) (Steffen et al., 2006). The goal of this article was to examine the role of BP, an indicator of the functioning of the cardiovascular system, in the established links between U.S. acculturation and pregnancy outcomes in U.S.-born (USB) and foreign-born (FB) U.S. Latinas.

Latinas, U.S. Acculturation, and Pregnancy Outcomes

Latinas in the United States, especially immigrant women, have infants whose birth weight is as healthy as that of more affluent European American women (Callister & Birkhead, 2002; Campos et al., 2008; Montoya-Williams et al., 2020; Zambrana et al., 1997). This surprising pattern is an important example of the "Latino Health Paradox," whereby Latinos in the United States have historically had better than expected health despite their socioeconomic disadvantages and devalued ethnic-minority status (Abraído-Lanza et al., 1999; Markides & Coreil, 1986; Ruiz et al., 2013). Unfortunately, these initially favorable perinatal outcomes worsen with more time and acculturation in the United States (Callister & Birkhead, 2002; Campos et al., 2007; Zambrana et al., 1997).

Acculturative changes, including those characterized by a transition from Latino to U.S. orientation, likely involve biopsychosocial mechanisms relevant to pregnancy outcomes, such as stress. In large-scale prospective studies, stress has been predictive of adverse pregnancy outcomes, including lower fetal growth (Dunkel Schetter, 2009, 2011). With more time in the United States and higher levels of U.S. acculturation, Latinas report higher levels of stress (Kasirye et al., 2005; Zambrana et al., 1997) and experience greater physiological dysfunction (Cedillo et al., 2021). This suggests that U.S. acculturation may be linked to Latinas' susceptibility to the adverse effects of stress and dysfunction in stress-related physiological systems, such as the cardiovascular system (Marwaha, 2022).

Blood Pressure and Fetal Growth

One potential mediator of the link between acculturation and fetal growth is cardiovascular functioning. The hemodynamics

involved in the circulation of maternal oxygen and nutrients to the uterus is critical for fetal growth. Changes in BP throughout pregnancy reflect this important dynamic. During pregnancy BP gradually decreases in the first 22–24 weeks gestation and then gradually increases until parturition (Grindheim et al., 2012; Pivarnik et al., 2016). These adjustments are, in part, the result of an increase in blood volume necessary to sustain the growing fetus. Although a mid- to late-term increase in BP is normative, high BP can also indicate risk of complications.

During pregnancy, BP that is clinically high at its peak (systolic BP ≥ 140 mmHg) or at its nadir (diastolic BP ≥ 90 mmHg) increases risk of preeclampsia, a risk factor for lower fetal growth (Preeclampsia & Eclampsia, 2013). At subclinical levels and in the context of high stress, our research suggests that diastolic BP (DBP) is a stronger predictor of fetal growth than systolic (SBP; Hilmert et al., 2008, 2014). Therefore, in the present study, we consider SBP and DBP, separately.

Associations between BP during pregnancy and pregnancy-related outcomes are well documented. However, the pathways by which acculturation influences BP-related processes during pregnancy are not. In the present study, we examine the complex dynamics of cultural orientation, stress, BP during pregnancy, and fetal growth in a sample of 1,011 Latinas.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were drawn from 1,024 pregnant Latinas ($n = 761$ FB Latinas, $n = 263$ USB Latinas) who took part in the Study for Hispanic Acculturation, Reproduction, and the Environment (SHARE). Information on SHARE is reported in Kasirye et al. (2005). SHARE was funded by the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences to investigate factors affecting reproductive outcomes among Latinas in a low-income California urban agricultural community. SHARE participants were recruited during their first prenatal visit at one of six obstetrics and gynecology clinics affiliated with San Joaquin General Hospital, in Stockton, California. Participants were eligible for the present study if they had data recorded from at least one prenatal appointment and a record of gestational age and birth weight following delivery. Based on those criteria, 1,011 Latinas were eligible for this study ($n = 753$, FB [97.5% Mexican]; $n = 258$, USB).

Procedure

During their initial prenatal visit, women who consented were scheduled for a 45-minute personal interview with a trained bilingual/bicultural field worker. Interviews were conducted in either English (26%) or Spanish (73%) in accord with the participant preference (Campos et al., 2007). Over the course of the interview, participants answered questions about their U.S. acculturation, perceived stress, pregnancy anxiety, and family support. Participants were compensated with a \$10 gift card to Walmart.

Measures

Demographics

Interviewers used standard questions to obtain participant's birthplace, birth year, marital status, and household income. Self-reported information was verified via medical record.

U.S. Orientation

The Revised Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans–Short Version (Cuellar et al., 1995) is made up of two six-item subscales of Mexican and Anglo orientation focusing primarily on language preferences, making the scale appropriate for Spanish speakers in general. Each subscale had high reliability (Mexican $\alpha = .88$; Anglo $\alpha = .94$). To examine the extent to which U.S. culture had become predominant a *U.S. orientation score* was computed by subtracting each participant's mean Mexican orientation score from their Anglo orientation score¹ (Cuellar et al., 1995).

Blood Pressure

Diastolic and SBP readings were taken during regularly scheduled prenatal appointments. These readings and the gestational timing of the readings were retrieved from participants' medical records. Each participant had up to three BP readings ($M = 2.98$ readings) from separate visits at different points in gestation.

Pregnancy Outcomes

Outcome variables were obtained from medical records. Infant weight was measured after delivery during documentation of live birth. Gestation length was computed from last menstrual period and ultrasound.

Psychosocial Factors

To focus on U.S. orientation, the following variables were included to account for known associations with BP (Hilmert et al., 2008) and pregnancy outcomes (Dunkel Schetter, 2011).

Perceived Stress. A six-item version of the reliable and valid Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) was used to measure perceptions of stress during the last month. These six items were selected based on earlier studies containing English and Spanish translations (Lobel, 1994; Rini et al., 1999; Zambrana et al., 1997); findings using this version of the scale in the SHARE data set have been previously published (Campos et al., 2007). Participants rated their perceived stress using 4-point Likert-type scales (0 = *never*; 3 = *all of the time*). High average scores reflect greater perceived stress. In this study, reliability for the shortened scale was .75 for participants interviewed in Spanish and .64 for participants interviewed in English.

Pregnancy Anxiety. This six-item scale measured sources of anxiety that were pregnancy-specific (e.g., I am concerned about having a hard or difficult labor/delivery; I worry about how my baby is growing in utero). Participants rated these items using 4-point Likert-type scales (0 = *never*; 3 = *all of the time*). This scale was developed for use in pregnancy research (Rini et al., 1999) and is reliable in English and Spanish. In this study, the measure had a

reliability of .81 for participants interviewed in Spanish and .80 for participants interviewed in English. Higher average ratings indicated greater pregnancy anxiety.

Family Support. This eight-item scale measured perceived familial support (e.g., I know that my family will always be there for me should I need them). Participants responded using 4-point Likert-type scales (0 = *strongly disagree*; 3 = *strongly agree*). Family itself was not defined for the participant, allowing them to ascribe their perception of family. This was adapted from the Provisions of Social Relationships Inventory to assess familial support (Turner et al., 1983) and was reliable ($\alpha = .96$) in assessing family social support in pregnant populations (Turner et al., 2000). Higher average scores indicated greater family support.

Analyses Overview

We tested a Bayesian multilevel structural equation model in *Mplus* 8.3 to examine associations among U.S. orientation, birth weight, DBP, SBP, stress (perceived stress and pregnancy anxiety), and family support. This approach is robust to missing data and nonnormal distributions (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2010). All primary analyses controlled for maternal age, previous number of childbirths, birthplace (FB or USB), smoking status, and alcohol use. Gestational age at birth was included as a covariate to birth weight, making the outcome a measure of fetal growth. Blood pressure was measured at the within-subjects level (i.e., Level 1). Thus, we examined individual mean levels of BP as well as individual BP trajectories across pregnancy. These slopes and intercepts were used at Level 2 as predictors of fetal growth.

The Level 1 predictor variable (gestational age at BP measurements) was person-mean centered, and all continuous Level 2 predictor variables (U.S. orientation, perceived stress, pregnancy anxiety, family support, maternal age, previous number of childbirths, and gestational age at birth) were grand-mean centered. Separate models examined DBP and SBP as mediators between U.S. orientation and fetal growth. For each analysis, we utilized a first run to ensure convergence within 5,000 iterations. We then used a follow-up analysis with 10,000 first burn iterations to verify convergence. Convergence was verified following recommendations by Asparouhov and Muthén (2010). All analyses showed good convergence criteria with final potential scale reduction of less than 1.01 and no significant Kolmogorov–Smirnov posterior distribution correlations.

Results

Descriptive and Bivariate Statistics

There were significant differences by birthplace in U.S. orientation, maternal age, family support, mean DBP and SBP across pregnancy, perceived stress, and birth weight (see Table 1). Maternal age was inversely correlated with length of gestation, perceived stress, and pregnancy anxiety (Table 2). U.S. orientation was positively correlated with mean SBP and DBP. U.S. orientation and DBP were

¹ The Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans–Short Version may also be used to consider Anglo orientation and Mexican orientation separately. The U.S. orientation scoring used in the present study was appropriate for the primary interest of the present study to examine the overall influence of acculturation, which may involve both the adoption of new culture and changes in one's original cultural orientation.

Table 1
Means and SD of Study Variables

Variable	FB (<i>n</i> = 754)	USB (<i>n</i> = 257)
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Mothers age at time of birth	26.12 (6.19)	22.14 (5.21)**
Annual income (in thousands)	41.27 (26.30)	38.84 (25.10)
Length of gestation in weeks	39.68 (2.23)	39.44 (2.13)
Birth weight in kilograms	3.39 (0.56)	3.29 (0.51)*
Previous number of births	2.25 (8.10)	2.24 (7.91)
Mean SBP	109.17 (9.92)	112.61 (9.91)**
Mean DBP	66.00 (7.26)	67.47 (7.45)**
Pregnancy anxiety	1.39 (0.85)	1.42 (0.82)
Family support	2.07 (0.36)	2.19 (0.44)**
Perceived stress	1.21 (0.54)	1.11 (0.70)*
U.S. orientation	−2.38 (1.14)	1.50 (1.67)**

Note. FB = foreign-born Latinas; USB = U.S.-born Latinas; SBP = systolic blood pressure; DBP = diastolic blood pressure.

For *t* test comparisons between groups **p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

inversely associated with maternal age and birth weight. SBP and DBP were inversely correlated with length of gestation.

Primary Analyses

Systolic Blood Pressure

There was a general increase in SBP across the course of pregnancy ($B = 0.156$, 95% Bayesian credibility interval, BCI [0.009, 0.303]; Figure 1). This increase did not vary by perceived stress, pregnancy anxiety, or family support. U.S. orientation was not associated with mean SBP ($B = 0.177$, 95% BCI [0.265, 0.629]) or SBP slope ($B = 0.012$, 95% BCI [−0.005, 0.029]). As neither mean SBP ($B = 0.001$, 95% BCI [−0.003, 0.006]) nor SBP slope ($B = −0.072$, 95% BCI [−0.265, 0.119]) were associated with birth weight, there were no significant indirect associations between U.S. orientation and birth weight as a function of SBP. This model accounted for 24% (95% BCI [21.2%, 27.7%]) of the variance in birth weight.

Diastolic Blood Pressure

In the DBP model (Figure 2), there was an increase in DBP across pregnancy ($B = 0.207$, 95% BCI [0.085, 0.326]) that was moderated by levels of U.S. orientation ($B = 0.015$, 95% BCI [0.001, 0.028]). At high levels of U.S. orientation (+1 *SD*) there was an increased slope in DBP across pregnancy ($B = 0.238$, 95% BCI [0.119, 0.352]); however, at low levels of U.S. orientation (−1 *SD*) this slope was attenuated ($B = 0.176$, 95% BCI [0.043, 0.305]). The DBP slope across pregnancy was inversely associated with birth weight, controlling for length of gestation ($B = −0.260$, 95% BCI [−0.502, −0.041]). Overall, U.S. orientation had a modest, but significant, indirect effect on birth weight (−0.004, 95% BCI [−0.010, −0.001]), that included a nonsignificant indirect effect through mean DBP and a significant indirect effect through DBP slope. This model accounted for 26% (95% BCI [22.0%, 29.6%]) of the variance in birth weight.

Discussion

This study is the first to link cardiovascular functioning to U.S. acculturation as a mechanism impacting Latina pregnancy outcomes. Acculturation has been associated with increased cardiovascular disease in Latino populations (Davignus et al., 2012) potentially due, in part, to acculturation-related stress (Kasirye et al., 2005; Zambrana et al., 1997) and the impact of stress on the cardiovascular system (Marwaha, 2022). The present results provide important new evidence that Latinas who had higher levels of U.S. orientation also had DBP trajectories during pregnancy associated with less favorable birth outcomes.

In the present study, stress and family support measures were not significantly associated with U.S. orientation, BP, and pregnancy outcomes. Past research has shown that the perceptions and effects of psychosocial variables change over the course of pregnancy (Glynn et al., 2001, 2004) but psychosocial measures were only assessed at a single timepoint in SHARE. Nuanced changes in stress and family support that could be related to U.S. acculturation may have been missed. Future research needs to consider a more sophisticated interplay of social experience, cardiovascular functioning, and pregnancy outcomes.

It is also possible that U.S. acculturation has effects on cardiovascular functioning relevant to pregnancy that are independent of the psychosocial processes assessed in the present study. That is, the long-term process of U.S. acculturation (Padilla & Perez, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2010), which involves the difficulties of adapting to a devalued ethnic-minority status for Latinas, may have affected the functioning of the cardiovascular system, perhaps through repeated stress responses or allostatic load (McEwen, 2004). Such impact may not be evident in associations between current cardiovascular functioning and proximal psychosocial stress. Consistent with this, past research has found that a lifetime of discrimination stresses experienced by African Americans affects cardiovascular functioning (Gee et al., 2012; Geronimus, 1992, 1996) and that childhood experiences of racism, but not adulthood experiences, interact with BP to predict pregnancy outcomes (Hilmert et al., 2014). To best understand the impact of U.S. acculturation on physiology, researchers should consider related stress experiences over the life course.

A possible limitation of this study is the sample's restricted variance on the U.S. orientation measure. Three quarters of the sample (74.6%) were FB and reported low levels of U.S. orientation (Table 1). In a sample with a wider range of U.S. acculturation experiences, future research can consider whether adoption of a new culture and loss of one's original culture are differentially associated with pregnancy outcomes. Also, this sample lacked variability in SES (see Kasirye et al., 2005), which was not included in the present model. Despite these potential limitations, we were able to leverage continuous measures of acculturation, BP, and pregnancy outcomes to detect theoretically consistent and meaningful patterns. Future studies that focus on the many ways in which U.S. acculturation unfolds and intersects with Latino experience in ways that may impact blood pressure can build on the findings of this work. Furthermore, future research should consider how other acculturation-related changes in physiology, including immune and endocrine parameters (Scholaske et al., 2021) may be contributing to the association between DBP and fetal growth.

Table 2
Correlation Table

Variable	U.S. orientation	Maternal age	Adjusted income	Parity	Pregnancy anxiety	PSS	Family support	Gestational age	BWT	Mean SBP	Mean DBP
Maternal age	-.250**	—									
Adjusted income	-.076*	-.049	—								
Parity	-.051	.275**	-.064*	—							
Pregnancy anxiety	-.019	-.156**	.046	-.079*	—						
PSS	.043	-.136**	-.031	.008	.122**	—					
Family support	.151**	-.034	-.031	.012	.008	-.158**	—				
Gestation age	-.041	-.083**	.003	-.059	.005	.037	-.060	—			
BWT	-.068*	.056	-.040	.039	-.031	-.002	-.073*	.589**	—		
Mean SBP	.147**	.182**	-.025	.034	-.054	-.066*	.100**	-.087**	-.040	—	
Mean DBP	.097**	.153**	-.040	.053	.019	-.043	.109**	-.074*	-.088**	.717**	—

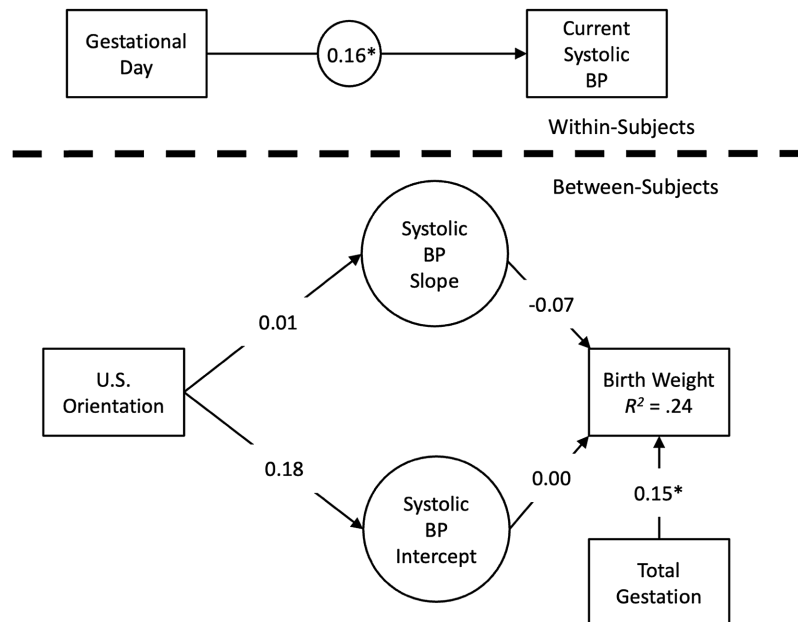
Note. PSS = Perceived Stress Scale; BWT = birthweight; SBP = systolic blood pressure; DBP = diastolic blood pressure.

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two tailed).

Acculturation to the United States is known to be a significant risk factor for cardiovascular health, and now this work connects Latina pregnancy to this pattern. In the future, awareness of a woman's acculturation and DBP changes during pregnancy may help to better identify those at risk of having lower birth weight babies. It is also possible that targeting the cardiovascular functioning of more

acculturated Latinas during pregnancy via BP-related interventions such as relaxation techniques or medication could help mitigate rates of low birth weight deliveries. Future studies may also want to consider whether aspects of Latino culture that may provide health advantages (Campos et al., 2018) can be recovered and benefit U.S. acculturated Latina pregnancies. Altogether, this research suggest

Figure 1
Multilevel Model of Systolic Blood Pressure Across Pregnancy as a Mediator of the Effects of Stress and Acculturation on Fetal Growth

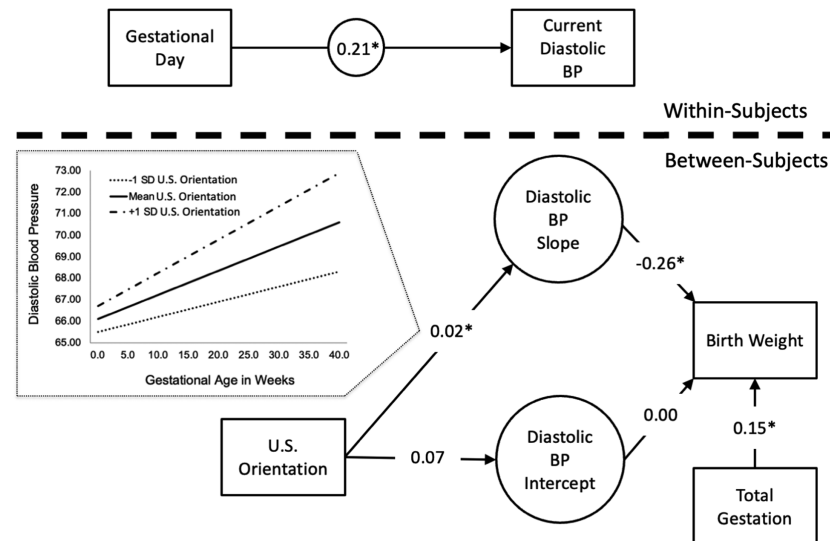


Note. Family support, gross family income, age of the mother at birth, mothers place of birth, smoking status, alcohol use, and previous number of children were included as covariates in the model but are omitted here for clarity. Gestational day is the point in gestation at which blood pressure was measured. The within-subjects coefficient represents average individual SBP trajectories across pregnancy (i.e., the MLM random slope of SBP across time). BP = blood pressure; SBP = systolic blood pressure; MLM = multilevel model.

* 95% Bayesian credibility interval does not include 0.

Figure 2

Multilevel Model of Diastolic Blood Pressure Across Pregnancy as a Mediator of the Effects of Stress and Acculturation on Fetal Growth



Note. Family support, gross family income, age of the mother at birth, mothers place of birth, smoking status, alcohol use, and previous number of children were included as covariates in the model but are omitted here for clarity. Gestational day is the point in gestation at which blood pressure was measured. The within-subjects coefficient represents average individual DBP trajectories across pregnancy (i.e., the MLM random slope of DBP across time). BP = blood pressure; DBP = diastolic blood pressure; MLM = multilevel model.

* 95% Bayesian credibility interval does not include 0.

that cardiovascular functioning is a promising new avenue for understanding the role of the sociocultural environment in pregnancy health generally and in ethnic-minority experience specifically. We hope researchers are inspired by these findings to pursue future research on this topic; it is needed to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the biopsychosocial nature of health.

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Received September 25, 2022

Revision received November 29, 2023

Accepted December 14, 2023 ■