

Acculturative stress in English language learners, predicting psychological well-being and buffered by social support

Author: Maeve Dwan O'Reilly

Supervisor: Dr. Pauline Hyland

Department of Psychology, Dublin Business School

Abstract

This study examined acculturative stress in a sample of English language learners. Analysis indicated that acculturative stress was predictive of psychological wellbeing and was moderately mitigated by social support. Acculturative stress also varied significantly across various demographic variables. The results highlight groups of learners at risk of psychological distress and has implications for learner support services.

Introduction

Using concepts applied previously to international students studying in higher education, this study sought to explore acculturative stress in English language learners in Ireland, a sample previously neglected in mental health research. More specifically, this study proposed to examine the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being.

Acculturative stress - a stress reaction arising in response to the acculturation process; wherein an individual, having developed in one cultural context, attempts to adapt within a new context (Berry, 2005).

This study also proposed to examine aspects of the learner experience that could impact on acculturative stress:

- Previous research found that international students with higher **language proficiency** reported lower levels of acculturative stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Lee, et al 2004; Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015).
- Past research also found that acculturative stress can either be mitigated or exacerbated depending on the **country of origin** of the individual due to cultural distance (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Poyrazil et al., 2004).
- **Length of residence** was also found to be associated with acculturative stress. However, whether longer residence led to higher or lower acculturative stress was contested across studies (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Yang et al, 2006; Campbell & Xu, 2004).
- Finally, learners' **living arrangements** could also impact on acculturative stress levels, in particular homestay accommodation (Campbell & Xu, 2004).

Finally, this study proposed to assess the effects of social support; previously found to buffer the effects of acculturative stress in international students (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Lee et al, 2004; Chavajay, 2013)

Method

106 language learners studying English in various language schools in Dublin took part in the study. The participants were from 15 different countries across Europe, Asia, and South America.

Participants responded to a survey either in paper form, or online. The survey included demographic questions, the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994), the Index of Sojourner Social Support (Ong & Ward, 2005) and the short form of the Psychological General Well-being Index (Grossi et al., 2006).

Hypothesis and Results

H1: Acculturative stress will be predictive of psychological distress in a sample of English language learners.

Linear Regression analysis found that acculturative stress significantly predicted mental well-being. Analyses demonstrated a moderate negative relationship between the two variables

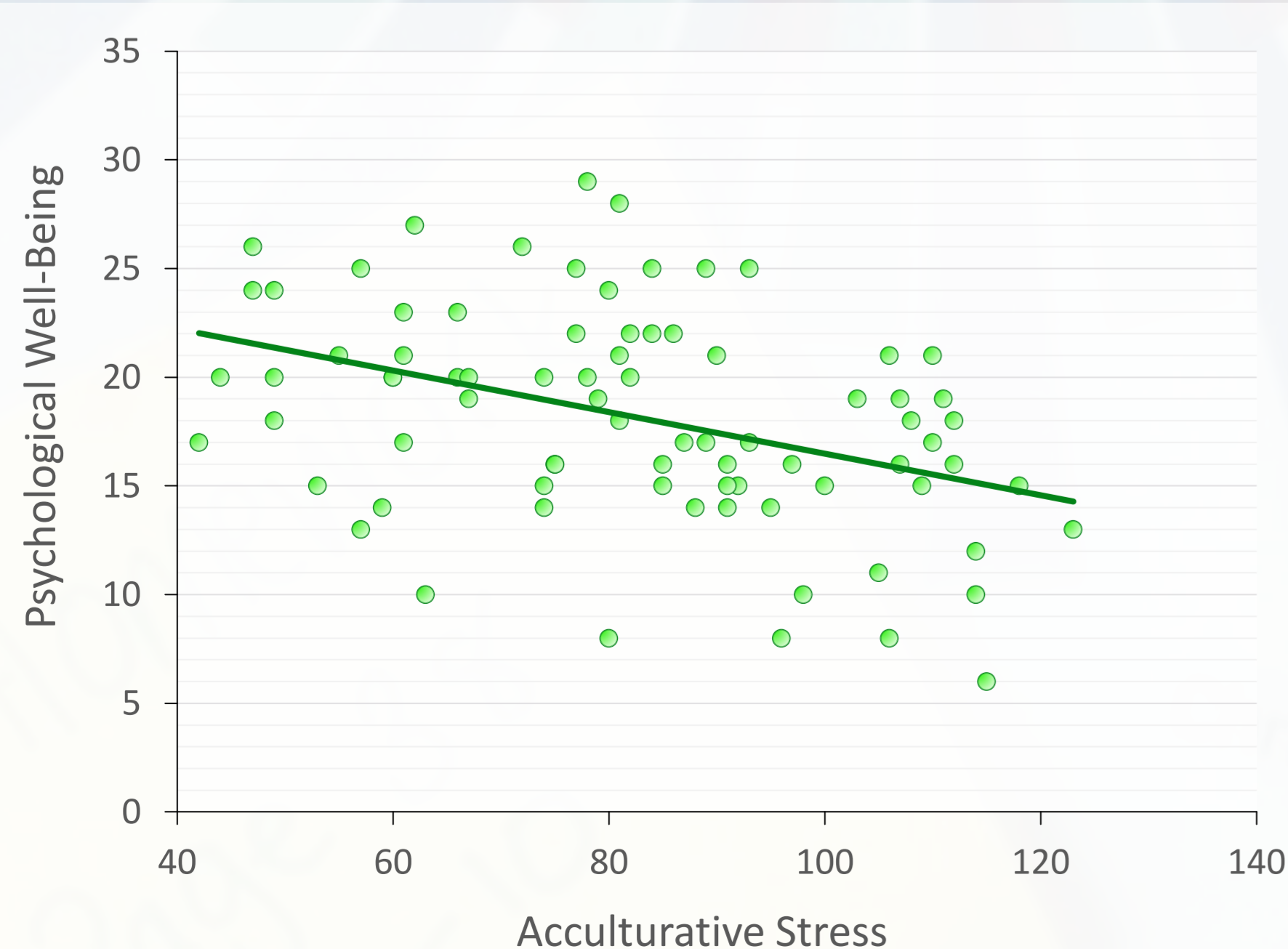


Figure 1 Acculturative Stress and Psychological Well-Being

H2: Participants with a high level of English proficiency will demonstrate lower levels of acculturative stress.

Although a downward trend was observed in stress levels, a one-way analysis of variance showed that acculturative stress did not differ significantly between the three language groups.

H3: Levels of acculturative stress will be lowest in participants from European countries, and significantly higher in participants from outside Europe.

A one-way analysis of variance showed that participants from South America reported significantly higher stress levels than participants from Asian countries, but European participants did not differ significantly from either group.

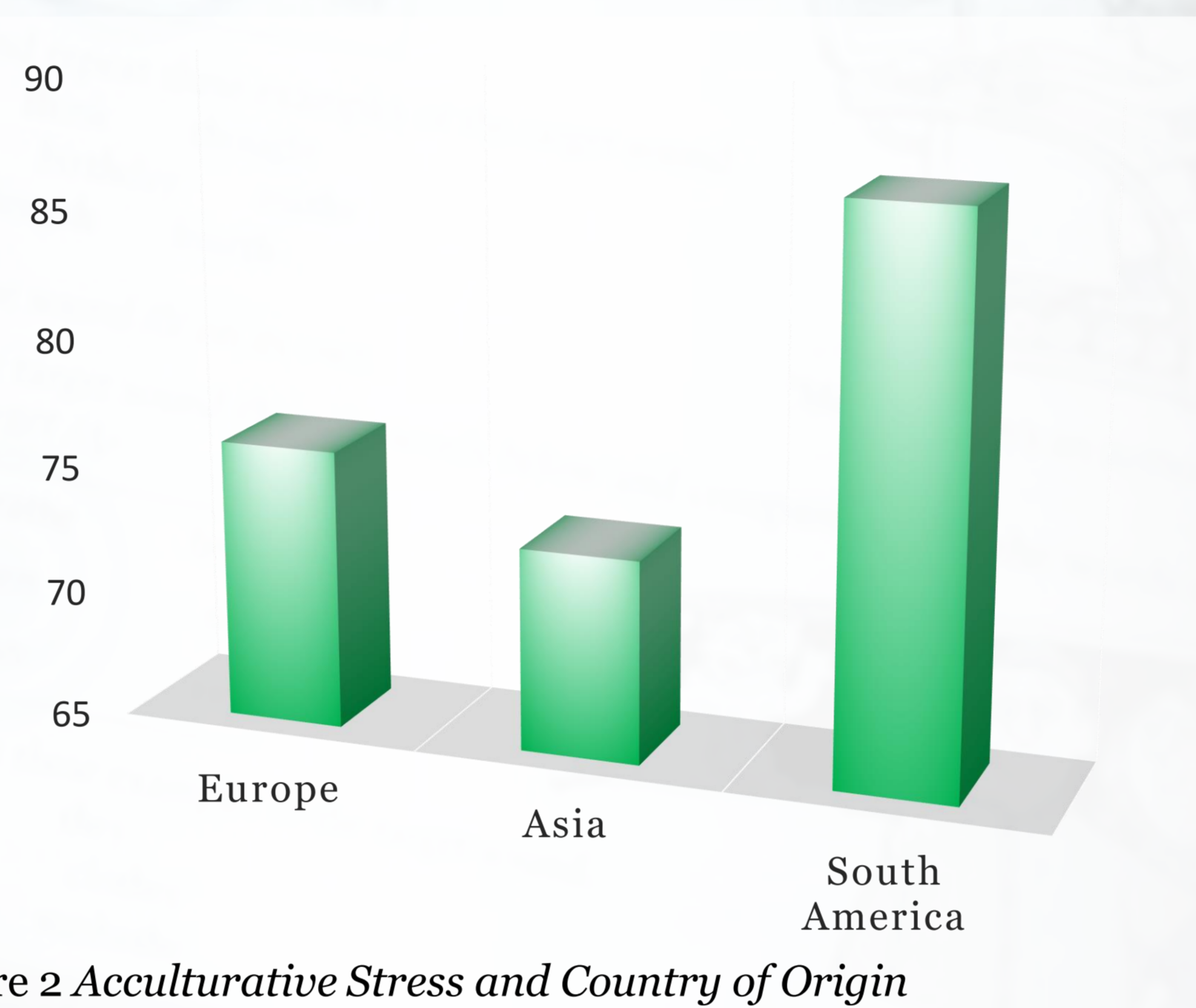


Figure 2 Acculturative Stress and Country of Origin

H4: There will be a significant difference in levels of acculturative stress depending on participants' length of residence in Ireland.

A one-way analysis of variance demonstrated that acculturative stress differed significantly among the groups. More specifically, with longer residency came greater acculturative stress. Psychological well-being followed a similar trend; longer residency was associated with a lower sense of well-being

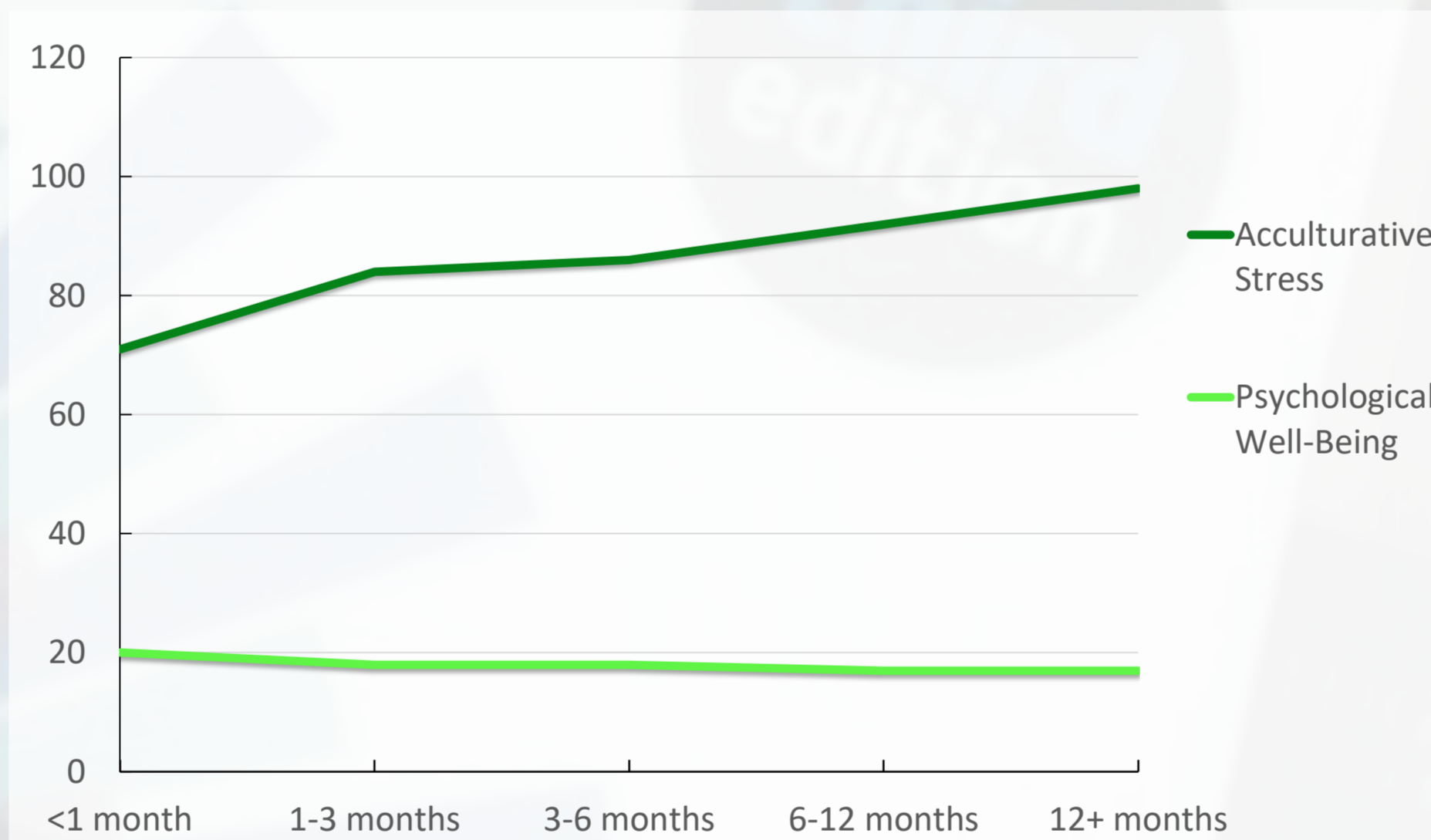


Figure 3 Acculturative Stress, Psychological Well-Being and Length of Residence in Ireland

H5: Levels of acculturative stress will differ significantly based on participants' living arrangements.

A one-way analysis of variance did not find a significant difference among the groups.

H6: There will be a strong negative relationship between perceived social support and levels of acculturative stress.

Linear regression analysis suggested that a moderate negative relationship existed between social support and acculturative stress.

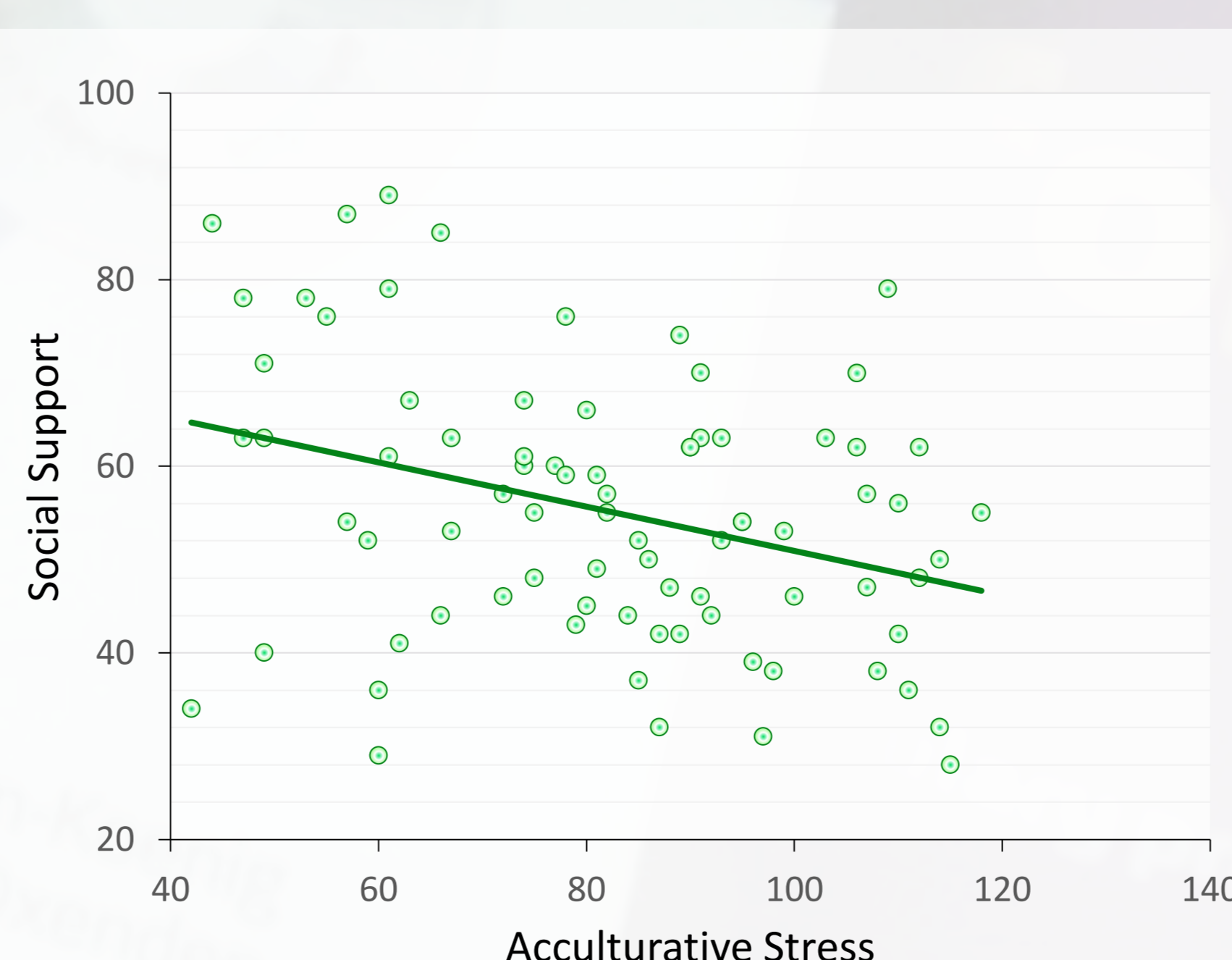


Figure 4 Acculturative Stress and Social Support

Additional Analysis

It was also found that acculturative stress differed significantly among age groups, with those aged 30-34 demonstrating significantly higher levels of acculturative stress.

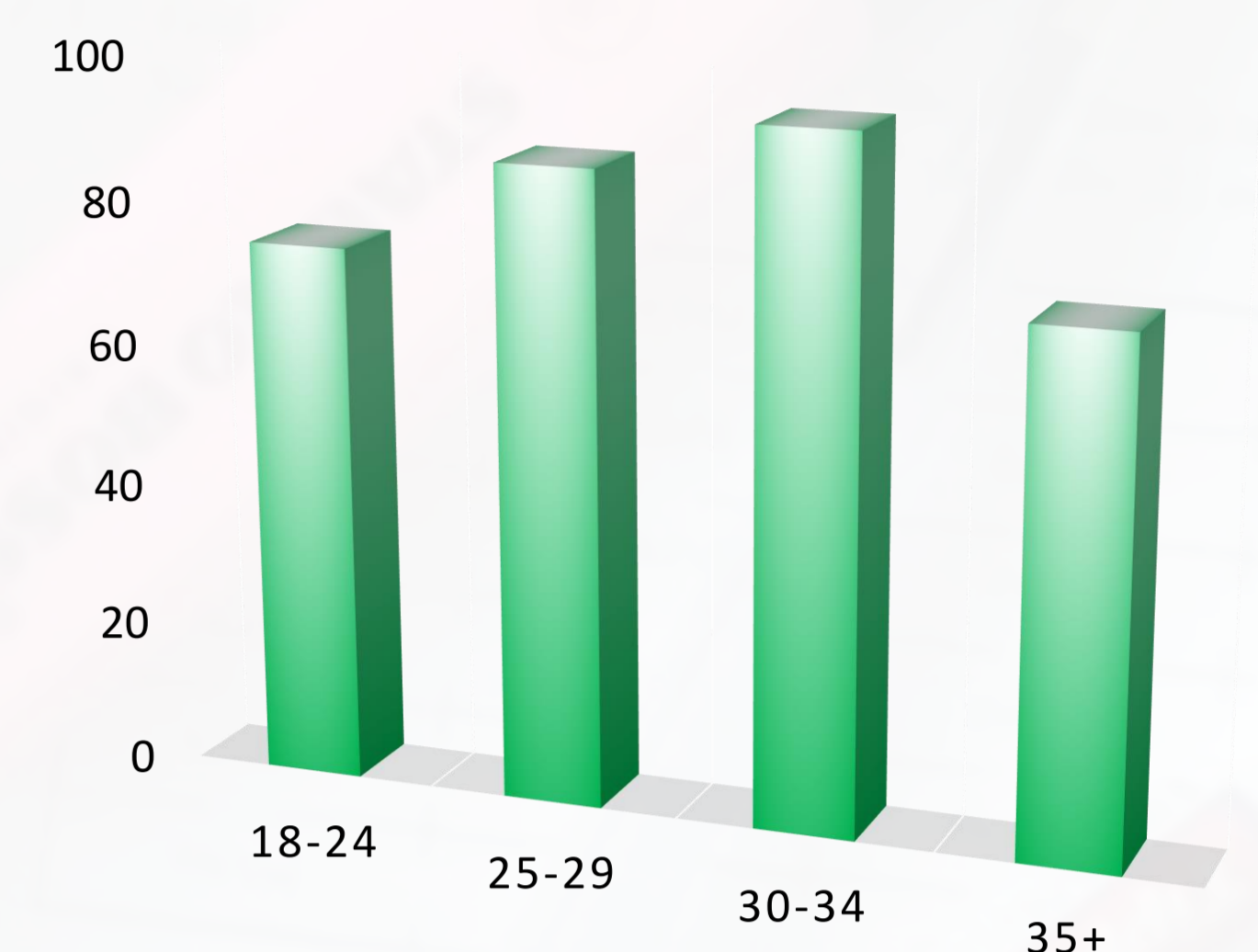


Figure 5 Acculturative Stress and Age

Discussion

The results of this study suggested that English language learners with higher acculturative stress were more likely to also have a weaker sense of psychological well-being. The results also suggested that those with higher perceived social support were likely to be less affected by acculturative stress. Some of the demographic variables assessed were associated with higher acculturative stress, including length of residence, age, and country of origin. These findings have implications for learner support services.

Future Research

Due to a lack of research on English language learner well-being, the rationale for this study was derived from the findings of studies examining international students. The results of the study suggest that several factors, although salient for international students studying in higher education, were not significant factors for English language learners.

Future research should continue to examine the area of learner mental health by expanding and including factors unique to the English language learner experience. Furthermore, future studies should seek to make such research more accessible to learners with lower language proficiency.

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