Dimensions of organized activity involvement among Latino youth: Impact on well-being

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Abstract
Well-being, including self- and academic perceptions, is a key element of Latino adolescents’ experiences. One factor that may be related to well-being among Latino adolescents is organized activity (OA) involvement. Drawing on a risk and resilience framework and utilizing principles of positive youth development, the current study aimed to examine this relation using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) with nested data from 660 Latino-identified youth in the National Education Longitudinal Study: 88 (NELS:88). Furthermore, home language, sex, and family SES were explored as possible moderators of relations between dimensions of OA and well-being. After accounting for prior levels of well-being, results suggest that OA participation, particularly OA intensity, is related to greater self-worth, locus of control, and educational expectations, and that these relations may be even stronger for youth from low-SES backgrounds. Implications for future research and policy are discussed.

The percentage of the United States population identifying as Latino has increased dramatically in the past twenty years (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014), and now accounts for about 23 percent of youth ages 17 or younger (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011). These youth face specific challenges related to their well-being, including increased experiences of discrimination and acculturative stress (Romero, Carvajal, Valle, & Orduna, 2007), which may impact personal as well as academic well-being (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006). Past research has largely focused on risk factors for Latino youth (Eamon, 2005; National Center for Mental Health Promotion & Youth Violence Prevention, 1999; Perez, 1992). However, another perspective employs a risk and resilience framework (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), which focuses on identifying mitigating factors that minimize the effects of risks (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). One of these mitigating factors may be found in examining the principles of positive youth development (PYD), which posit that contexts that allow youth to enhance their interests, skills, and abilities are instrumental to facilitating well-being (Larson, 2000). Participation in one context in particular, organized activities (OA), appears to be beneficial to adolescents’ positive youth development (Barber, Stone, & Eccles, 2010; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004; Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010; Simpkins, Delgado, Price, Quach, & Starbuck, 2013; Yin, Katims, & Zapata, 1999).

OA are defined as activities that are not part of the school curriculum, are structured, supervised by adults, and emphasize skill-building (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). Mahoney et al. (2005) specify that “organized activities” is an umbrella

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term, comprising community-, school-, and locally-organized programming. Involvement in OA provides adolescents with an alternative to participating in risky behaviors, and is associated with higher well-being and academic functioning (Agans et al., 2014; Beavers, 2012; Darling, 2005; Himelfarb, Lac, & Baharav, 2014; Mahoney et al., 2005; Rose-Kransor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006). Specifically, participation has been demonstrated to benefit two types of self-worth targeted by this study: self- and academic perceptions. Research indicates that OA involvement has been linked to higher self-concept (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006; Duncan, Strycker, & Chaumeton, 2015), as well as higher academic achievement, both in terms of postsecondary school education and performance in secondary school (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b; Mahoney et al., 2005). Finally, Simpkins et al. (2013) have highlighted that so-called “macro factors,” including culture, ethnicity, and immigration, may influence adolescents’ participation in OA, suggesting that certain effects of OA involvement may be unique among Latino adolescents. In fact, OA may be especially beneficial for well-being among this population. Almost half of adolescents involved in one study indicated involvement in OA as a way to help Latino adolescents succeed (Behnke, Gonzalez, & Cox, 2010). Furthermore, a qualitative study of Latino adolescents found that OA involvement helped students embrace their culture and connect with other students culturally within the OA, which in turn fostered belonging in school (Farrell, 2008). These benefits may be even greater for Latino youth than their counterparts of other ethnicities, even other minority ethnicities: one study indicated that OA participation was related to higher self-worth and lower rates of depression only among Latino youth, and not among White or African American youth (Duncan et al., 2015). All of these studies suggest that OA may be particularly beneficial for Latino youth, despite the fact that rates of OA involvement are generally lower among these youth (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012).

Notably, OA involvement among Latinos has been insufficiently studied in relation to self-perceptions (i.e. locus of control, self-worth) and academic perceptions (i.e. educational expectations). However, these two types of self-worth are particularly relevant in this population. For example, low self-worth is a risk factor for depression among Latino adolescents (Orth, Robins, Widaman, & Conger, 2014), while locus of control has been shown to be an important factor in supporting positive health behaviors among this population (Loue, Cooper, Traore, & Fiedler, 2004; Roncancio, Berenson, & Rahman, 2012). Furthermore, educational expectations also impact the outcomes of Latino youth, such that lower educational expectations among these youth are negatively related to future educational attainment (Beal & Crockett, 2010). These educational expectations impact not only the future attainment and well-being of these youth and their families, but also the U.S. economy (Robles, 2009).

Therefore, both self- and academic perceptions are particularly important forms of well-being to enhance among Latino youth, and exploration of the effects of OA involvement on these specific aspects of well-being is needed.

In addition, potential moderators of the OA and well-being relation have yet to be examined, though there is evidence to support several possibilities, including primary home language, gender, and SES. First, though studies have not examined language directly, it has been found that youth who are first-generation benefit more from participation in OA because it can facilitate the adjustment between their home culture and the mainstream culture (Camacho & Fuligni, 2015). This suggests that OA involvement may be more beneficial for adolescents whose primary home language is Spanish. Second, OA involvement may be more beneficial for Latino girls than boys, since some studies have found lower baseline levels of self-worth and sports participation among Latina girls (Erkut & Tracy, 2002). On the other hand, given Latino gender norms regarding participation in activities outside the home, Latino boys may be more supported in their participation in OA (Dawes, Modecki, Gonzales, Dumka, & Millsap, 2015) and may therefore benefit more from participation. Finally, although it has not been studied specifically among Latinos, it has been suggested that SES may moderate these relations, such that adolescents from lower SES levels benefit more from involvement in OA (Mahoney, 2000; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Marsh, 1992). For example, adolescents from low-income families who participate in OA have been found to benefit more from OA involvement on both of the well-being factors discussed here, educational aspirations, and self-esteem (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). In conclusion, further work is necessary to determine the specific impact of OA participation on self- and academic perceptions, as well as the potential moderating effects of primary home language, gender, and SES among this population.

Although OA involvement in general is beneficial for adolescent well-being, recent literature notes the importance of distinguishing between particular dimensions of OA participation (Barber et al., 2010; Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010; Simpkins, Little, Weiss, & Simpkins-Chaput, 2004). Two of the most commonly assessed dimensions of participation include: (1) intensity and (2) consistency. Intensity of involvement is typically defined as how frequently an adolescent participates in a specific activity or activity context (Bohnert et al., 2010; Denault & Poulin, 2009). More intense involvement has been associated with positive academic outcomes, such as higher school belonging and school affect, as well as lower depressive symptoms (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Viau & Poulin, 2014). In one study that used the same NELS:88 dataset analyzed in this study, more intensive participation in organized activities was associated with greater educational attainment, even eight years following high school graduation (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Consistency of OA involvement is defined as the amount of time an adolescent has been involved in an organized activity (Bohnert et al., 2010). Studies have shown that being consistently involved in OA is associated with positive outcomes, such as higher grades, more positive attitudes toward school, higher academic aspirations, psychological adjustment, and higher college attendance rates (Darling, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006a; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Viau, Denault, & Poulin, 2014; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003). In the same previous study using the NELS:88 dataset, duration of participation in organized activities was positively associated with educational attainment, even many years after graduation (Gardner et al., 2008). In sum, these findings highlight the importance of capturing the different dimensions of involvement, as each dimension of OA involvement may play a unique role in adolescents’ development.
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