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Latino adolescents' academic success: The role of discrimination, academic motivation, and gender

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Abstract

Guided by the academic resilience perspective, the current longitudinal study examined whether academic motivation mediated the relation between Latino adolescents' ($N = 221$) experiences with discrimination and their academic success. The potential moderating role of gender was also examined. Using multiple group analysis in structural equation modeling, findings indicated that perceived discrimination at Wave 2 significantly predicted academic motivation at Waves 2 and 3 for boys but not girls. Additionally, for boys, academic motivation significantly mediated the relation between perceived discrimination and academic success. Findings underscore the importance of considering the long-term implications of discrimination for Latino boys' academic success. Furthermore, findings encourage moving beyond the examination of gender differences in specific academic outcomes (e.g., academic success) and focusing on how the processes leading to academic success vary by gender.

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The Latino population is the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S. (Bernstein, 2008) and in 2003 over 2.75 million Latino adolescents were enrolled in high schools throughout the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). This representation in educational settings, however, does not translate into degrees attained, as almost half of Latinas (i.e., 47%) and Latinos (41%) over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The consequences of not completing high school are severe. For instance, Latino individuals without a high school degree earn \$5000 less, annually, and are more likely to live below the poverty line than their counterparts who have a high school degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). These bleak consequences of not completing high school have prompted researchers to examine the factors associated with Latino adolescents' academic success.

In order to understand the factors that promote academic success among individuals who face adversity, researchers have turned to the academic resilience perspective. According to the academic resilience literature, academic risk factors are those that have the potential to impede academic success (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). For instance, several studies have identified experiences with discrimination as a significant risk factor for academic success (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006). However, researchers also explain that, despite exposure to risk factors such as discrimination, some adolescents manage to succeed academically (Arellano & Padilla). Thus, in addition to identifying risk factors, the academic resilience perspective focuses on factors that enable individuals to overcome these potential risks (i.e., resilience factors). For example, scholars have identified adolescents' academic motivation as a significant resilience factor that can promote positive academic outcomes (Anderson & Keith, 1997). Thus, the academic resilience perspective argues that it is important to consider not only factors that can impede academic success, but also those that can promote positive academic outcomes. Because previous findings have identified discrimination as a potential risk factor and academic motivation as a potential resilience factor, the current study examined the associations among Latino adolescents' experiences with discrimination, academic motivation, and academic success. Furthermore, given gender differences in the variables of interest that have emerged in previous work (Finch, Kolody, & Vega, 2000; Plunkett & Bámaca-Gómez, 2003), as well as traditional gender socialization patterns in Latino families (Azmitia & Brown, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999), which may introduce variability into the associations examined in the current study, we tested the potential moderating role of gender on the relations of interest.

Consistent with the academic resilience perspective, researchers have found that perceived discrimination is associated with academic outcomes among middle and high school adolescents from ethnic minority backgrounds (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Eccles, Wong, & Peck, 2006; Katz, 1999; Martinez et al., 2004; Neblett et al., 2006; O'Connor, 1997; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). For instance, adolescents' experiences with discrimination have been associated with lower levels of academic motivation (Eccles et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2003), lower GPAs or grades (Eccles et al.; Martinez et al.; Neblett et al.; Wong et al.), lower levels of academic persistence (Neblett et al.), an increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Martinez et al.), higher levels of academic disengagement (Katz; Ogbu & Simons), and lower levels of academic well-being in general (DeGarmo & Martinez). Thus, an examination of discrimination is imperative when trying to gain a better understanding of the factors associated with academic success among ethnic minority youth.

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