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Family factors mediate discrimination related stress and externalizing symptoms in rural Latino adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Externalizing disorders are more prevalent in rural than urban settings and account for disproportionately high mental health service costs for rural adolescents. Although cultural stressors such as discrimination have been associated with externalizing problems in ethnic minority youth broadly, this relationship is understudied in Latinos, particularly those in rural settings. Further, though the associations of family processes such as familism and family conflict have been studied in relation to youth externalizing symptoms, whether these processes change in the face of adolescent discrimination stress remains unknown.

Methods: A moderated multiple mediation model was used to examine the association between perceived discrimination, externalizing symptoms, and the indirect effect of family factors (familism, and family conflict) in a large sample ($n = 455$) of rural Latino youth. We also evaluated whether indirect and direct effects of discrimination on externalizing symptoms differed in boys versus girls.

Results: Familism and family conflict each independently mediated the relationship between discrimination related stress and externalizing symptoms. However, discrimination had a direct effect on externalizing symptoms for boys only. In girls, this association held only when family factors were accounted for. Post-hoc analyses reveal that the moderating effect of sex on discrimination is driven by differences in rule-breaking behavior, as opposed to aggressive behavior.

Conclusion: Findings suggest that discrimination is associated with changes in the family environment which in turn invoke elevated risk for externalizing problems. Further, family-focused interventions that address externalizing problems may be especially effective for adolescent girls.

Characterized by emotion dysregulation and impulsivity, externalizing disorders include maladaptive behaviors directed toward other people and their property (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and are most often associated with mental health referrals in childhood and adolescence (Kazdin, 1991). Externalizing disorders are associated with poor academic performance (Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004), peer and parental rejection, and delinquency during adolescence (Barnow, Lucht, & Freyberger, 2005), as well as substance use and criminal activity in adulthood (Farrington, 1989). The National Comorbidity Survey Replication-Adolescent supplement estimates the prevalence of externalizing disorders in adolescents is 19.6% (Merikangas et al., 2010), and that the presence of externalizing disorders in young adulthood is correlated with being male, Latino and from a rural community (Forster,

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Grigsby, Soto, Schwartz, & Unger, 2015; Kessler et al., 2005).

Overall, Latino youth exhibit rates of externalizing disorders comparable to their non-Latino white counterparts; however, beginning in early adolescence, Latinos and Native Americans show higher rates of alcohol and illicit drug use (De La Rosa, Holleran, Rugh, & MacMaster, 2005). In addition, Latinos are more likely to engage in and be criminalized for delinquent behavior (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 2005), a salient feature across externalizing disorders. Latinos are 30% more likely to exhibit stable externalizing spectrum problems in adulthood relative to White Americans (Kessler et al., 2005) and thus are functionally impaired for longer. It bears mentioning that English language competency and difficulties with standardized test interpretation may partially account for the elevated prevalence of externalizing problems in Latino youth, in particular for disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD) whose rates seem to vary by culture (Canino & Alegría, 2008). Although few studies have examined rates of externalizing problems in rural youth, 23% of ethnically diverse youth from the Rural Adaptation Project self-reported elevated levels of aggression, considerably exceeding national norms for adolescents (Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo, 2013). Further, disorders such as CD, ODD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), account for the largest proportion of service costs in rural adolescents due to significant comorbidity with other psychiatric disorders and increased use of inpatient and juvenile justice resources (Costello, Copeland, Cowell, & Keeler, 2007). Greater structural disadvantages along with fewer social supports (e.g. prosocial school programming) may help to explain higher rates of externalizing behavior in rural communities, as community instability (e.g. recent moves in the community, number of residents with high school diplomas) and density of alcohol sales are associated with higher rates of adolescent substance use in rural, but not urban communities (Lo, Weber, & Cheng, 2013).

While the examination of group differences is an important avenue of research, it is helpful for studies to extend beyond distal variables such as ethnic group membership or rural versus urban status to understand how more proximal characteristics may be related to mental health outcomes. Investigating proximal characteristics such as acculturative stress—stress due to assimilating to a new culture (Romero & Piña-Watson, 2017)—discrimination, and family factors as predictors of psychopathology may help to tease apart indirect effects of ethnicity and rurality on the mental health outcomes of minority youth. Grant et al. (2003) provide a model for the role of stress on the development of adolescent psychopathology that usefully organizes proximal variables that may lead to increased externalizing symptoms in rural Latino youth. Specifically, stressors (e.g. major life events, minor events, chronic conditions) are mediated by social processes (e.g. family dynamics), moderated by youth characteristics (e.g. sex), and predict psychopathology (e.g. symptoms, disorders). This model has been used extensively to study the mediating effect of family environment on proximal stressors and externalizing problems in minority youth (e.g. Manongdo & Ramirez Garcia, 2007; Wilson, Foster, Anderson, & Mance, 2009).

Contextual and chronic stressors such as perceived discrimination show associations with externalizing behaviors in Native American and African American adolescents (Galliher, Jones, & Dahl, 2011; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009), yet these effects are insufficiently studied in Latinos and rural communities. Discrimination is a salient risk factor in the Latino community, particularly for individuals of Mexican origin. For instance, 50% of Mexican American young adults in a national sample reported experiencing discriminatory treatment several times a year or more due to their ethnicity (Pérez, Fortuna, & Alegria, 2008). Similarly, about 50% of Latino high school students report having experienced or observed discriminatory actions against other Latinos (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). Experiences of discrimination in Latino adolescents increase over the course of high school (Benner & Graham, 2011), and are reported in and outside of school settings (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000). Discrimination is linked to internalizing symptoms (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), poor self-esteem (Edwards & Romero, 2008; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007) and poorer academic outcomes (Martinez et al., 2004) in U.S.-born and foreign-born Latino adolescents (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Yet, less is known about the association of discrimination with externalizing problems during adolescence. In studies with immigrant and refugee youth in Europe results are inconsistent—some support the link between experiences of discrimination based on adolescents' foreign status and self-reported externalizing symptoms (Stevens, Vollebergh, Pels, & Crijnen, 2005), while others find no relationship (Montgomery & Foldspang, 2007). In the United States, reliable links between discrimination and substance use are supported in African American (Brody, Kogan, & Chen, 2012; Gibbons et al., 2010; Wiehe, Aalsma, Liu, & Fortenberry, 2010) and Latino adolescents (Kam & Cleveland, 2011). Interestingly, findings from the Rural Adaptation Study showed that discrimination was associated with both aggression and anxiety only for those students with high teacher turnover, suggesting that stable relationships may reduce the burden of discrimination (Smokowski et al., 2013).

Thus, while social factors (e.g. rurality) and cultural-stress (e.g. acculturative stress, discrimination) may increase risk for externalizing disorders, data also support the importance of protective social processes. Familism, a cultural construct which refers to family loyalty, solidarity and cohesion (Vega, 1990), has been identified as a protective factor for externalizing problems in low income Latino youth (Loukas & Prelow, 2004). In a cross-sectional sample of 149 Latino immigrant families, higher levels of familism were related to lower levels of aggressive behavior, and fewer conduct problems and rule breaking behaviors in adolescents, which the authors hypothesized was due to a stronger inclination to follow rules set forth by their families (Marsiglia, Parsai, & Kulis, 2009). Familism is also associated with better parenting practices (e.g. strong communication between parents and children), and indirectly negatively associated with problem behaviors such as antisocial behavior, defiant behavior at school, and physical hostility in Mexican-American adolescents (Santisteban, Coatsworth, Briones, Kurtines, & Szapocznik, 2012). Similarly, in neighborhoods where parents report concerns about safety, Mexican-origin mothers with high levels of familism engage in parenting practices rated as less harsh than mothers with low levels of familism (White, Roosa, & Zeiders, 2012). Germán, Gonzales, and Dumka (2009) found further support for the buffering effect of familism in their study of Mexican-origin adolescents. Their results showed that familism predicted lower levels of externalizing behaviors as rated by their teachers, even for those who socialized with deviant peers—demonstrating a buffering effect of this culturally linked family construct. Collectively, this literature suggests that familism is an important interpersonal factor that may serve to protect Latino adolescents in the face of acculturative stress and adverse neighborhood contexts.

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