



Mexican-origin adolescents' educational expectation trajectories: Intersection of nativity, sex, and socioeconomic status



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 October 2015

Received in revised form 8 October 2016

Accepted 7 November 2016

Available online 30 November 2016

Keywords:

Adolescence

Educational expectations

Mexican-origin

Nativity

Sex

Socioeconomic status

ABSTRACT

Expectancy value theory and a cultural-ecological framework are integrated in this study to examine the trajectories of 246 Mexican-origin adolescents' ($M_{age} = 12.52$, $SD_{age} = 0.58$; 51% girls, 62% U.S.-born) educational expectations across eight years. Findings from a multilevel growth model revealed that early adolescents expected to complete a post-bachelor's degree, but expectations declined in middle adolescence and improved in late adolescence. This pattern was more pronounced for immigrant, compared to U.S.-born, adolescents. Higher socioeconomic status was associated with higher expectations. Boys and girls differed in their trajectories, such that boys showed a curvilinear trajectory and girls showed a stable trajectory. Nativity moderated these sex differences. Immigrant boys showed curvilinear trajectories that dipped in middle adolescence and immigrant girls showed a declining trajectory. In contrast, U.S.-born boys and girls showed linear and stable trajectories. The discussion addresses suggestions for targeted interventions with at-risk subgroups during a sensitive period in adolescence.

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1. Introduction

Mexican-origin adolescents' educational achievement merits attention, given that their high school (58.4%) and college degree (9.9%) attainment rates lag substantially behind national averages (86.3% and 29.1%, respectively; *U.S. Census, 2013*). Scholars who study Mexican-origin adolescents' achievement gap have focused on educational attainment (e.g., obtaining a high school degree or not), but few have focused on adolescents' *educational expectations*: self-assessments of the level of schooling adolescents expect to complete (*Bohon, Johnson & Gorman, 2006; Eamon, 2005*). This oversight is significant, as cognitive theories (Expectancy-Value Theory: *Eccles & Wigfield, 2002*) and research (*Mello, Anton-Stang, Monaghan, Roberts, & Worrell, 2012*) suggest that expectations of school success predict future educational and career attainment. Further, theory suggests that individual characteristics (i.e., nativity, sex) and family socioeconomic status (SES) can inform such expectations (*García Coll et al., 1996; Wigfield, Tonks, & Eccles, 2004*).

Among ethnic minority adolescents, the intersection of individual characteristics and family SES create unique experiences that may play a role in their educational trajectories (*García Coll et al., 1996*). For example, immigrant adolescents may be aware of the barriers they face in applying for and receiving financial aid for college, and this may influence what level of schooling they expect to achieve (*Olivas, 2009*). However, adolescents' expectations of educational achievement may develop in ways that depend on their social positions at a given point during adolescence. Given our lack of attention on Mexican-origin adolescents' educational expectations, little is known about how social position informs changes in educational expectations over the course of adolescence. To address these gaps in the literature, the current study integrates a cultural-ecological framework (*García Coll et al., 1996*) with expectancy-value theory (*Eccles & Wigfield, 2002*) by exploring the trajectories of Mexican-origin adolescents' educational expectations from early to late adolescence and assessing within-group variability among these adolescents by testing the moderating roles of nativity, sex, and family SES.

1.1. Trajectories of educational expectations

Expectancy-value theory (*Eccles & Wigfield, 2002*) suggests that adolescents' expectations for success and perceived value of an outcome are associated with their persistence, performance, and task choices.

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For example, educational expectations can be important precursors to studying, getting good grades, seeking out educational enrichment programs, and applying for college. Adolescence is a developmental period generally defined by important transitions through middle school (i.e., early adolescence), high school (i.e., middle adolescence), and into tertiary education (i.e., late adolescence; Smetana, 2010). During adolescence the link between educational expectations and attainment is most important. In early adolescence (i.e., age 11–13), adolescents begin to explore their educational and career goals (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). In middle adolescence (i.e., age 14–17), adolescents begin planning and preparing for such goals. In particular, SAT preparation, college, and financial aid applications are due within this period (Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999). Finally, youth in late adolescence (i.e., age 18–20) experience the social realities of aging out of high school and transitioning into available higher educational and occupational opportunities (Shanahan, 2000).

Currently, only two studies explore changes in educational expectations across adolescence and into young adulthood (Mello, 2008, 2009) and none have focused solely on normative samples of Mexican-origin youth. Mello's studies use the *National Education Longitudinal Study* (NELS) data, which include a multi-ethnic sample with 12% of the sample being Hispanic youths. Mello identified a curvilinear trajectory where youths' expectations dropped slightly from age 12 to 14 but increased from age 16 to 20, and dropped slightly from age 20 to 26. Despite the curvilinear trajectory, youths' educational expectations always fell between completing some college education and completing a college degree. Youths' educational expectation trajectories did not differ for African American, Native American, European American, or Hispanic youths. However, these studies focus on Hispanic youth as a *monolithic* group, ignoring the unique histories, social expectations, and educational experiences of Hispanic youth from different countries of origin (Delgado, Ettekal, Simpkins, & Schaefer, 2016; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Only one study has focused on Mexican-origin youth (Bravo, Toomey, Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2015); however, this study used data from adolescent mothers beginning in the third trimester of pregnancy and extended for three years.

There is substantial variability across Hispanic subgroups in social characteristics that may influence trajectories of educational expectations. Mexican-origin adolescents – the largest U.S. Hispanic and immigrant subgroup – are at risk because of higher economic disadvantage (U.S. Census, 2013), school climates that may discourage Hispanic youths' academic integration and enrollment in higher level coursework (see Gandara & Contreras, 2009, for an in-depth review), and parents' lower knowledge of the U.S. education system (Bohon, Johnson, & Gormon, 2006; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006), relative to non-Hispanic adolescents. Further, sociopolitical dynamics within the U.S. have racialized and marginalized Mexican-origin individuals leading to higher experiences of discrimination, especially for young men, immigrants, and darker-skinned individuals (Ortiz & Telles, 2012). Recently, as Mexicans comprise the largest number of unauthorized immigrants to the U.S. (62%; Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2010), state and U.S. political rhetoric has further targeted Mexican-origin individuals, especially Mexican-origin immigrants, by proposing anti-immigrant legislations across several southern and southwestern states (Arrocha, 2011). The increased anti-immigrant rhetoric expressed in political and media spheres and the increase securitization of southern border states has intensified the feelings that Mexican-origin individuals are highly monitored and unwelcome in the U.S., especially in the southern and southwestern regions (Menjívar, 2016). This larger sociopolitical context may have implications for Mexican-origin adolescents' educational expectation trajectories, making this group of youth important to study.

Changes in *Mexican-origin adolescents'* educational expectations have not been documented; thus, our understanding is limited to insights from cross-sectional and comparative data in early and middle adolescence. Using data from the *Children of Immigrants Project*, St. Hilaire (2002) noted that 47% of the Mexican-origin early adolescents

believed they would complete a graduate degree and only 1% did not expect to finish high school. Using a subset of the *Add Health* data, Bohon et al. (2006) noted that Mexican-origin middle adolescents reported they were moderately likely to attend college, but that they were less certain of their college prospects as compared to non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, and Cuban adolescents. Taken together, these studies suggest that, although a subset of Mexican-origin adolescents hold high educational expectations, Mexican-origin adolescents' expectations are lower than many subgroups of the U.S. population, including other Hispanic subgroups.

Taking into account the sociopolitical context in which Mexican-origin youth reside, we expect that Mexican-origin adolescents' educational expectations may exhibit curvilinear trajectories, as suggested by previous research on ethnically diverse groups (Mello, 2008; 2009), but in a more pronounced manner. Mexican-origin adolescents may begin their educational careers with expectations tied closely to their ideal "possible-selves" and less to their social realities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). As Mexican-origin adolescents become more aware of opportunity (Gottfredson, 1981; Quintana, 1998) and discriminatory differences in social class and ethnicity in early adolescence (Ortiz & Telles, 2012; U.S. Census, 2013), and then combine this with their understanding of personal identity and social position in middle and late adolescence (Quintana, 1998; Trusty & Harris, 1999), they may significantly lower their expectations to fit their perceived opportunities and barriers. Previous research suggests Mexican-origin adolescents recover their high expectations in late adolescence (Mello, 2008). This recovery is potentially a result of adolescents learning about financial aid opportunities available to support college attendance, developing concrete plans to aid in their college and career transitions (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2007), and feeling pressure to make the on-time transition into college along with their peers (Shanahan, 2000).

1.2. Educational expectations and adolescents' social position

A cross-cultural iteration of expectancy-value theory (Wigfield et al., 2004) provides support for the idea that cultural and social contexts must be acknowledged to understand cultural variation in academic achievement. We take this idea one step further, and integrate a cultural-ecological framework (García Coll et al., 1996), which suggests that social positioning constructs (e.g., nativity, race, sex, and social class) intersect to create barriers and opportunities towards successful development, both between and within ethnic groups. Current research focuses our attention on nativity, sex, and family SES as three individual and family characteristics that may uniquely and interactively impact Mexican-origin adolescents' educational expectations (Bohon et al., 2006; St. Hilaire, 2002).

Looking to adolescents' nativity, we are not aware of any research that explores cross-sectional nor longitudinal differences in educational expectations between immigrant and non-immigrant Hispanic or Mexican-origin youth; therefore, we turn to research focused on nativity differences in educational adjustment in general. This body of research has noted "immigrant paradox" phenomena, which suggests immigrants show better health and educational outcomes than native-born individuals (García Coll & Marks, 2012). Specifically, Hispanic immigrant youth show higher achievement (e.g., grade point average) and engagement (e.g., valuing and liking school) than later generation youth (Pong & Zeiser, 2012). Further, a growing literature suggests that the "immigrant-paradox" is not only an intergenerational phenomenon, but also an intragenerational phenomenon (Almeida, Johnson, Matsumoto, & Godette, 2012; Salas-Wright, Vaughn, Schwartz, & Córdova, 2016; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009), such that the protective effect of being an immigrant declines the longer adolescents live in the U.S. This research guides our hypothesis that immigrant adolescents will report higher educational expectations than U.S.-born adolescents, but such benefits may decline over time.

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