



## Brief report: The role of three dimensions of sexual well-being in adolescents' life satisfaction



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### ABSTRACT

Guided by theoretical (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997) and empirical work (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005), this cross-sectional study examined whether sexual well-being (sexual self-acceptance, importance of mutual consent, importance of safe sex) was associated with life satisfaction among Mexican adolescents, and whether these associations were moderated by gender, age, and familism. Mexican adolescents (54% girls, 72% middle schoolers, 30% sexually active) completed surveys. Findings indicated that a greater belief in the importance of safe sex was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction. Greater sexual self-acceptance was associated with life satisfaction, and familism moderated this association. This association was stronger among adolescents who reported low familism. This study contributes to the understanding of sexual adolescent well-being and psychological adjustment in Mexico, an understudied cultural context.

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Adolescent sexuality has primarily been conceptualized as a health risk. However, recent sex-positive perspectives view it as a normative and essential developmental aspect, which can have positive consequences (Harden, 2014; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Theoretical work has emphasized the importance of developing sexual well-being, including acceptance of sexual desire, decision-making involving mutual consent, and safe sex when sexually active (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997). Higher sexual well-being may be linked to better psychological adjustment, as limited research has demonstrated (e.g., Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). However, little is known about sexual well-being in Latin America, where gender and sexual socialization is more conservative (Pick, Givaudan, & Poortinga, 2003).

Research suggests associations between sexual behavior and psychological adjustment among American and Australian adolescents. For example, sexual experience is associated with well-being (Vrangalova, & Savin-Williams, 2011), but early initiation of first intercourse is associated with increased depressive symptoms (Meier, 2007; Spriggs & Halpern, 2008). In addition to behaviors, elements of sexual well-being, such as entitlement to desire, and sexual subjectivity are associated with global well-being (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck & French, 2016).

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Associations between sexual well-being and psychological adjustment may differ in other countries, including Latin America. Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes how cultural factors shape adolescent sexuality, suggesting the importance of studying these topics in diverse contexts (Raffaelli, Kang & Warini, 2012). One cross-sectional study suggests that Mexican adolescents in latent classes with romantic commitment and sexual behaviors report more depressive symptoms and anxiety (Espinosa-Hernández & Vasilenko, 2015). However, to our knowledge no study has examined sexual well-being and positive psychological adjustment in Mexican adolescents.

In addition, Ecological Systems Theory suggests that cultural values may play a role in Mexican adolescents' sexual well-being. For example, among Latino adolescents in the US, familism, or the strong bond between family members marked by feelings of loyalty, is a protective factor that has been associated with more family cohesion and less conflict (German, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2009; Lorenzo-Blanco, Unger, Baezconde-Garbanati, Ritt-Olson, & Soto, 2012). The effect of sexual well-being on psychological adjustment may be strengthened when adolescents internalize the value of familism, because they may experience a more supportive family environment when exploring or thinking about their own sexuality. Evidence also indicates associations between depressive symptoms and sexual activity are stronger for girls and younger adolescents (Espinosa-Hernández et al., 2015).

Thus, guided by theoretical and empirical work (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005; Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2012), we examined whether aspects of sexual well-being (self-acceptance, importance of mutual consent, and importance of safe sex) were associated with life satisfaction and whether these associations were moderated by gender, age, and familism among Mexican adolescents.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants and procedure

Our cross-sectional data were from the second cohort of a study of two public, non-religious middle and high schools in Puebla, Mexico. The principal investigator contacted schools that had previously participated (Espinosa-Hernández, Vasilenko, & Bámaca-Colbert, 2015). The first school housed students from 7th to 12th grade (middle and high school); the second school housed students from 7th to 9th grade (middle school). School principals chose participating classrooms based on convenience. Institutional Review Board procedures were followed and a waiver of written parental consent was obtained. Adolescents who assented completed a Spanish language survey and received candy.

Participants were 1123 adolescents (54% girls; 72% middle schoolers; age range 12–19;  $M = 15.1$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). Most were Catholic (84.8%) and lived in two parent households (70.9%). Few were sexually active (29.5%).

### 1.2. Measures

We translated measures from English to Spanish by committee approach (Cha, Kim, & Erlen, 2007). Bilingual research assistants and the first author translated the items as a group to ensure cultural appropriateness. A pilot study was conducted among middle school students to make sure items and instructions were interpretable. For all scales, we created sum scores; higher scores indicate higher construct endorsement.

#### 1.2.1. Predictors

*Importance of Mutual Consent* and *Importance of Safe Sex* were measured with items from the Sexual Responsibility and Sex Refusal Skills scale (O'Donnell, Myint-U, O'Donnell, & Stueve, 2003). Participants responded using a 4-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). Two items assessed *Importance of Mutual Consent* (e.g., “Before I decide to have sex, I should be sure I don't feel forced by my partner.”);  $M = 6.31$  ( $SD = 1.73$ ;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ). Two items assessed *Importance of Safe Sex* (e.g., “Before I decide to have sex, I should be sure my partner or I won't get pregnant/disease.”);  $M = 6.13$  ( $SD = 1.94$ ;  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). *Sexual Self-Acceptance* was measured with the Sexual Self-Acceptance subscale (Deardorff, Tschann, & Flores, 2008), developed to examine Latino youth's views on whether it is wrong to have sex (e.g., “Do you feel guilty about having sex?”). It has been used among Mexican adolescents (Espinosa-Hernández et al., 2015). Participants responded to five items using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Very much*) to 5 (*Not at all*);  $M = 18.62$  ( $SD = 4.02$ ;  $\alpha = 0.72$ ).

#### 1.2.2. Outcome

*Life Satisfaction* was measured with the Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; e.g., “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life”). This measure has been used among Mexicans (Diener & Diener, 1995). Participants responded to five items using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*);  $M = 24.84$  ( $SD = 6.30$ ;  $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

#### 1.2.3. Moderators and controls

*Familism* was measured with the Cultural Values Familism subscale (Unger et al., 2002; e.g., “The family should consult close relatives (uncles, aunts) concerning its important decisions”). This measure has been used among Mexican adolescents (Espinosa-Hernández et al., 2015). Participants responded to six items on 4-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4

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