

Extracurricular activities and group belonging as a protective factor in adolescence



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ABSTRACT

In the transition into adulthood, family and school play a critical role protecting the adolescent from engaging in behaviors that could cause mental health problems. Nevertheless, there are other social groups and structured activities that have shown to act as an educational activity and as a protective factor as well. The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between belonging to different types of social groups and the positive and negative mental health indicators of Mexican adolescents. Participants were 840 Mexican adolescents ranging between 12 and 17 years old. Results indicated that belonging to artistic and scout groups reported a statistically significant correlation with higher levels of emotional intelligence. Belonging to sport and artistic groups reported a statistically significant correlation with higher levels of resilience. No statistically significant results were found on anxiety, depression, and/or disruptive behaviors. Further research is needed, especially investigating possible predictive and moderating variables.

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Actividades extraescolares y pertenencia al grupo como factor protector en la adolescencia

RESUMEN

En la transición a la vida adulta, la familia y la escuela juegan un papel protector decisivo para proteger al adolescente de comportamientos que podrían acarrearle problemas de salud mental. No obstante, hay otros grupos sociales y actividades estructuradas que han funcionado como actividades educativas además de como factores protectores. El objetivo de este trabajo ha sido investigar la relación entre la pertenencia a diferentes tipos de grupos sociales y los indicadores positivos y negativos de salud mental de adolescentes mexicanos. Los participantes eran 840 adolescentes mexicanos de edades comprendidas entre los 12 y los 17 años. Los resultados indican que la pertenencia a grupos artísticos y scouts correlacionaba significativamente con elevados niveles de inteligencia emocional. Pertenecer a grupos deportivos y artísticos correlacionaba significativamente con elevados niveles de resiliencia. No se dieron resultados estadísticamente significativos en ansiedad, depresión o conductas problemáticas. Se necesita continuar investigando, sobre todo en las posibles variables predictoras y moderadoras.

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In the transition into adulthood, family and school play a critical role with regards to protecting the adolescent in engaging in behaviors that could cause pathologies. However, other social groups and their structured activities, including the follow-up of goals and objectives, the supervision of an adult as a leader, and the adherence to rules and schedules, could also act in an educational

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manner, specifically promoting the development of abilities and the generation of new learning opportunities (Balsano, Phelps, Theokas, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

A longitudinal research conducted by Carbonell et al. (2002) has found that family cohesion, positive perspective, social support, and healthy interpersonal relationships are some of the main protective factors for adolescents, and all of them can be favored through group belonging.

Research shows that some of the protective factors of highest impact for adolescents are family, school, work, sports, and recreational microenvironments that are healthy and favorable to development. This could be due to the fact that social networks created in the established groups promote the formation of a psychosocial support system, in which individuals can express and share emotions and affection, thus benefiting their mental and physical health (Abello & Madariaga, 1999). It should be noted as well that, according to psychosocial theories, it is from their loyalty to reference groups (Erikson, cited in Papalia, Wendkos, & Duskin, 2004, p. 470) where adolescents solve their identity crisis. This loyalty not only implies belonging to a group of friends or colleagues, but also the sense of belonging to a set of values, an ideology, a religion, a social movement, a creative enterprise, or an ethnic group.

A study by Knifsend and Juvonen (2013) analyzed the complexity of social identity in adolescents and found that prevailing social groups, which adolescents identified with themselves, were those based on extracurricular activities. Therefore, it is of interest to this study to find if there are any differences in the indicators of mental health according to the group they belong to and the activities performed by these groups. It is also assumed that these peer groups can be considered a protective factor at this important stage of life and that they usually help to promote learning, free expression of identity, and mainly the consolidation of a sense of belonging.

The following is some scientific evidence found in the literature for each of the groups that have been addressed in the present study.

Sport Groups

Sports play an important role in the social relationships linked to it.

The demands of competitive sports carry with them the development of psychological competences such as tolerance and the overcoming of challenges (Ruiz, de la Vega, Poveda, Rosado, & Serpa, 2012). They are beneficial to self-concept and tend to decrease the symptomatology of anxiety and depression (Candel, Olmedilla, & Blas, 2008), as well as the depression related to low academic achievement, particularly in females (Gore, Farrell, & Gordon, 2001). Other studies in Latin America reported a positive relation between the systematic practice of sports and different processes, including self-esteem, autonomy, conviction, and the use of adequate coping skills (Broche, Diago, & Herrera, 2012). Also, results reported by López, Balaguer, Castillo and Tristán, 2011 indicated that it is athletes' involvement in the task, and not the ego, the one that has a predictive validity over motivation and, in turn, over self-esteem.

On the contrary, research conducted by Molina, Castillo, and Pablos (2007) did not find any differences in the self-esteem of people that practice sports, in comparison to those that do not. In the same way, Hume et al. (2011) did not find any relation between the practice of sports and an individual's symptoms of depression.

Harju, Luukkonen, Hakko, Rasanen, and Riala (2011) concluded that it is team sport, not the practice of individual sport, what decreases the risk for depression. Moreover, they found that males

participating in team sport reported a decreased in the onset of affective disorders, but some males also reported an increase in behavioral problems.

It should be noted that, in some occasions, sport groups could be a risk factor in facilitating contact with drug users and drug circulation (Moreno, 2002), or even be associated with alcohol consumption (Denault, Poulin, & Pedersen, 2009).

Scout Groups

Since its beginnings, The World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) has promoted the service to both country and community, through leadership, outdoors living, and the creation of social support. Several studies have been conducted worldwide studying some of the characteristics of this movement that could favored adolescents, especially in the development of social capital, connection with the community (Polson, Kim, Jang, Johnson, & Smith, 2013), self-esteem (Royse, 1998), and an adequate development of citizenship, all of this through the development of self-regulation skills and the consolidation of human rights (Mills, 2013).

It is worth mentioning the work by Rohm and Osula (2013), who studied the relationship between the scout model and the leadership models centered in volunteering. They found that the scout model mainly favors the characteristics of voluntary subordination, being authentic, relationship by commitment, moral responsibility, spiritual transcendence, and transforming influence.

Religious Groups

Among the studies that have covered the effects of religion in adolescents, the one by Francis (2013) analyzed the purpose of life in a sample of adolescents aged 13 to 15. Results showed that both implicit and explicit religiosity (the one that besides the belief also implies the practice of ritual) are beneficial to creating a purpose of life in adolescents.

The study by Hodge, Marsiglia, and Nieri (2011) found that for adolescents of Hispanic origin, mere religious affiliation is not associated with a decrease in the use of drugs; nevertheless, the assistance by and integration in a social religious network does predict lower probability in the use of marijuana and inhalants.

When analyzing the different dimensions related to Christian religiosity, Grier and Gudiel (2011) found that in the face of antisocial behaviors, the influence of peers is stronger than the belonging to a religious group. However, the variables of social justice and interest in the Bible did predict pro-social behaviors and maintain a negative correlation with peer pressure. For this reason, they concluded that religiosity could contribute to positive decision-making in adolescents.

Existing evidence of the relationship between religiosity and affective variables such as depression and wellbeing are contradictory. A study conducted with Muslim adolescents found a positive correlation between religiosity, happiness, and physical and mental health, and a negative correlation between religiosity and anxiety and depression (Abdel-Khalek, 2007). On the contrary, a study conducted amongst German adolescents, whose culture gives less importance to religion, did not find statistically significant correlations between the variables of religious involvement and the happiness-depression scale (Wenger, 2011). Finally, a study conducted with a multicultural sample found that the sense of personal religiosity maintains a predictive validity for coping with stress, even while controlling variables such as neighborhood and gender (Amhed, Fowler, & Toro, 2011).

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