



Ethnic identity and gender as moderators of the association between discrimination and academic adjustment among Mexican-origin adolescents

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A B S T R A C T

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Existing work has identified perceived discrimination as a risk factor that may contribute to the relatively poorer academic outcomes exhibited by Mexican-origin adolescents in the U.S. The current study examined the longitudinal associations among perceived discrimination and three indices of adolescent adjustment in the school setting (i.e., grade point average, teacher reports of externalizing, adolescents' deviant peer associations) among 178 Mexican-origin adolescents (53% female). Ethnic identity affirmation was examined as a protective factor expected to reduce the negative effects of discrimination on adolescents' adjustment, and gender was examined as a potential moderator of the associations of interest. Findings indicated that the deleterious effects of discrimination on adolescents' adjustment in school were particularly salient for Mexican-origin male adolescents. Importantly, ethnic identity affirmation emerged as a protective factor for Mexican-origin male adolescents by buffering the negative effects of discrimination on their externalizing behaviors in school.

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Graduating from high school and attending college represent important milestones during adolescence and emerging adulthood that are strongly linked to access to tangible resources (e.g., gainful employment, higher income) in adulthood. For example, in 2008 the unemployment rate in the U.S. for those who had not completed high school was 13%, compared to 6.8% for those who had only completed high school, and 2.3% for those who had completed at least a bachelor's degree (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). Given these associations, it is disconcerting that certain ethnic minority groups are disproportionately at greater risk for negative academic outcomes. Mexican-origin adolescents represent one such group. For instance, educational statistics from 2008 indicate that the high school dropout rate¹ for individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 in the U.S. was 18.3% for Latinos, which is almost double the rate for Blacks (9.9) and over triple the rate for Whites (4.8; Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010). Scholars have long theorized about risk factors specific to ethnic minority youth, such as experiences with discrimination, which can undermine successful developmental and academic outcomes (García Coll et al., 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Furthermore, studies have documented that Mexican-origin adolescents' experiences with discrimination are associated with indices of maladjustment, such as greater depressive symptoms (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), lower self-esteem (Edwards & Romero, 2008), and lower academic motivation (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor,

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¹ These statistics represent the status dropout rate, which is defined as individuals who are not enrolled in high school and do not have a high school credential.

Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009). Because experiences with discrimination may contribute to the relatively poorer academic outcomes among Mexican-origin adolescents, it is important to examine how discrimination experiences may be linked to indicators of Mexican-origin adolescents' adjustment in academic settings and to identify factors that may buffer the negative impact of discrimination.

Grounded in a risk and resilience framework, which posits that individuals may possess resources that can help them overcome the risks associated with adverse experiences (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1987), the current study contributed significantly to the extant literature by testing the conceptual notion that cultural strengths may protect ethnic minority adolescents from the negative effects of cultural stressors (e.g., Gonzales & Kim, 1997). Specifically, we examined whether ethnic identity affirmation would minimize the negative effect of perceived discrimination on three indices of adolescents' adjustment in the academic setting: teacher reports of externalizing behaviors, school-reported grade point average (GPA), and adolescent reports of deviant peer associations in school. Although a few studies have examined the association between perceived discrimination and academic outcomes, to our knowledge, no studies have examined whether *ethnic identity affirmation* reduces the negative impact of perceived discrimination on Mexican-origin adolescents' academic outcomes.

Mexican-origin adolescents' experiences with discrimination and adjustment

Scholars suggest that to gain a more complete understanding of ethnic minority youth's normative development, it is necessary to understand the influence of discrimination in their lives (García Coll et al., 1996). As previously noted, numerous studies have documented the salience of perceived discrimination among Mexican-origin adolescents (e.g., Berkel et al., 2010; Delgado, Updegraff, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2011; Romero & Roberts, 2003; Stone & Han, 2005). Given the increased importance placed on others' perceptions of the self during early to middle adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Harter, 1999), understanding how others' biases based on one's ethnic background (i.e., discrimination) are associated with adolescents' adjustment is especially relevant during this developmental period. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), experiences in which one's social group is devalued can threaten one's self-concept, lead to negative self-perceptions, and affect one's mental health. Existing empirical work has provided support for these theoretical notions. For example, in a study of Mexican-origin adolescents, higher levels of perceived discrimination were associated with lower self-esteem (Romero & Roberts, 2003). Similarly, with a Latino sample comprised primarily of Mexican-origin adolescents, Umaña-Taylor and Updegraff (2007) found higher levels of perceived discrimination to be associated with lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms. Finally, in a longitudinal study of Mexican-origin early adolescents, Berkel et al. (2010) found that perceived discrimination predicted increases in anxiety and depression over a two-year period.

Similar associations have emerged in the few studies that have examined Mexican-origin adolescents' perceptions of discrimination and their *academic* outcomes. For example, with a Latino sample comprised primarily of Mexican-origin adolescents, DeGarmo and Martinez (2006) found higher levels of perceived discrimination to be associated with lower levels of academic well-being (defined by GPA, likelihood of dropout, homework frequency, and performance dissatisfaction). In addition, in their longitudinal study of Mexican-origin adolescents, Berkel et al. (2010) found that adolescents' perceived discrimination in 5th grade predicted decreases in academic self-efficacy and teacher-reported grades two years later. Based on their longitudinal work with immigrant adolescents (including those of Mexican-origin), Suárez-Orozco et al. found the link between discrimination and academic outcomes to be explained by the stress that adolescents experience as a result of perceiving discrimination, which may undermine their ability to concentrate and focus on their school work (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Taken together, findings from this literature suggest that adolescents' perceptions of discrimination may create a context in which their self-concept is threatened, they are unable to remain focused on academic goals, and their mental health and academic performance suffers. Although discrimination is a salient reality for Mexican-origin adolescents and has been consistently associated with maladjustment, it is important to note that there are many Mexican-origin adolescents who demonstrate resilience by succeeding in the academic setting. Thus, consistent with a risk and resilience perspective (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1987) and scholars' recommendations to consider how culturally-based strengths may serve protective functions (Case & Robinson, 2003), the current study examined whether ethnic identity affirmation would protect Mexican-origin adolescents from the negative effects of perceived discrimination on adjustment in their academic settings.

Ethnic identity affirmation as a protective factor

Although culturally informed stressors such as discrimination have been identified as a significant risk factor for Mexican-origin adolescents, scholars suggest that culturally specific mechanisms may protect minority children from the negative effects of such stress (Gonzales & Kim, 1997). For instance, ethnic identity² has been argued to serve as a protective resource that enables individuals to be resilient when encountering discrimination (Phinney, 2003), and empirical support for this notion has been documented (e.g., Romero & Roberts, 2003). At the broadest level, ethnic identity has been conceptualized as

² The term "ethnic identity" is used when research being reviewed is not specific about one ethnic identity component, and the term "ethnic identity affirmation" is used when research is specifically focused on the affective component (or positive feelings) of one's ethnic identity.

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