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Racial/Ethnic Differences in the Educational Expectations of Adolescents: Does Pursuing Higher Education Mean Something Different to Latino Students Compared to White and Black Students?

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Abstract

There are striking disparities in the academic achievement of American youth, with Latino students being a particularly vulnerable population. Adolescents' academic expectations have been shown to predict educational outcomes, and thus are an important factor in understanding educational disparities. This article examines racial/ethnic differences in the future expectations of adolescents, with a particular focus on how expectations about higher education may differ in frequency and meaning for Latino youth. Participants included 375 urban ninth-grade students (49% Latino, 23% White, 22% Black, and 6% other; 51% female) who gave written descriptions of how they pictured their lives in five years. Responses were subsequently coded for content and themes. Results demonstrate that Latino youth were less likely to picture themselves attending college when compared to Black and White youth, and more likely to hold social goals, such as starting their own family. Ethnic/racial differences also were found in the themes present in responses, with Latino and Black students more likely than White students to describe individuation and materialistic goals, and to give more unrealistic responses. For Latino youth only, higher education goals were associated significantly with individuation themes. In addition, for Latino youth, adolescents who wished to pursue higher education reported more depressive symptoms and emotional distress than those who did not picture going to college, whereas the opposite pattern was evident for Black and White youth. These differences may reflect cultural values, such as *familismo*. Practice implications include the importance of culturally tailoring programs aimed at promoting higher education.

Introduction

There are striking disparities in the academic achievement of American youth. In 2008, approximately 81% of White students graduated from high school within four years, or on time, compared to only 62% of Black students, and 64% of Latino students. Of students who graduated, 72% of White, 56% of Black, and 64% of Latino students immediately enrolled in some form of higher education (NCES, 2010a; NCES, 2010b). Among students who did go on to post-secondary education, students of color were more likely to attend junior or community college and less likely to complete their degrees (NCES, 2010b). Such disparities have significant consequences in the U.S., where academic achievement is

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strongly linked to lifelong income and socioeconomic status (NCES, 2010a). Lower SES is associated, in turn, with worse physical and mental health and more difficult life circumstances (e.g., increased exposure to violence) throughout the adult years. Given these serious consequences, identifying and addressing the factors that contribute racial and ethnic disparities in academic achievement is critical.

Historically, most research on educational disparities focused on Black-White comparisons. In the past decade, however, national studies on educational outcomes have provided statistics on White, Black, and Latino youth to better reflect the American demographic composition. During this time, an increasing number of studies have documented the structural reasons for lower educational achievement among Latino youth (Flores-Gonzalez, 1999; Nieto, 2005). In contrast, less empirical attention has been given to cultural and psychological factors that may contribute to lower educational achievement among Latinos. Given that Latinos are the fastest growing minority group in the U.S. and that there are important cultural differences between Latinos and Blacks, more research in this area is needed. The goal of this article is to understand better one potential psychological factor that may contribute to higher education achievement among Latino youth, namely adolescents' future educational expectations.

Structural, cultural, and individual factors associated with educational disparities

Educational disparities are the result of structural, cultural, and individual factors. Structural factors influencing Latino youth are largely the result of poverty, and include attendance of schools that have higher student-to teacher ratios. Overcrowding reduces the amount and quality of resources available to these already underprivileged students (Flores-Gonzalez, 1999; Ready, Lee, & Welner, 2004; Rivera-Batiz & Marti, 1995). Additionally, inequalities in educational funding perpetuate the lack of resources (e.g., textbooks, extracurricular activities) for the neediest children, further contributing to their academic underachievement (Beese & Liang, 2010; Carey, 2004). Latinos also face challenges associated with bilingual education. In a time when Latinos are the fastest growing minority group in the United States, bilingual education is being eradicated from public schools at a feverish pace (Nieto, 2005).

The classroom curriculum and atmosphere also may contribute to less engagement in youth of color. For example, the curriculum in most school systems may be less personally relevant to many students of color, as it often acknowledges the histories and prominence of White individuals throughout the school year (Nieto, 2000). American teachers in American schools and families from Latin American backgrounds who attend these schools also may hold differing beliefs and interpretations of events in the world (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003). Similarly, cultural differences in pedagogy preferences may lead to the disengagement of Latino youth. For example, there is evidence of racial/ethnic differences in intergroup instruction, with Latino children more likely to participate in dyadic and triadic processes in attempts to learn about different activities and roles at home than White children (Rogoff et al., 2007). This is in stark contrast to a typical public school, in which students are expected to work independently and quietly for large portions of the day.

Cultural values such as *familismo* and *ser buen educado* also may impact educational attainment among Latinos. In many Latin American communities, *familismo* is a firm belief in strong family ties, with the family as the primary source of support and loyalty to the family taking precedence over one's personal desires (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006; Negy & Woods, 1992). This belief has implications for children leaving the home as adults, especially when it is time to attend college. Though the majority of Latino youth and their parents believe a college education is important for a successful future, many youth report the need to support their family as the reason for not continuing with their education (Pew

Hispanic Center, 2009). Latino students also may have difficulty adjusting to life away from family, on whom they have depended as their primary source of support (Kenny & Stryker, 1996).

Although *ser buen educado* can be literally translated to “be well educated,” the Spanish phrase carries much greater meaning than that. *Ser buen educado* not only means to have a good formal education, but also means to be respectful, well mannered, and have high morals (Valdes, 1996; Halgunseth et al., 2006). This understanding of education implicates a much more social definition than thought of in English. This may lead to Latino children and adolescents formulating much more social goals rather than academic goals, especially goals around family life, whether it be assisting in their current family or starting a family of their own.

Finally, there are individual reasons for differences seen in academic achievement independent of differences in actual ability. Indeed, many of the structural and cultural factors previously discussed likely contribute to achievement disparities through their impact on individual psychological factors. Several researchers have examined psychological factors that may influence academic motivation and achievement in students of color, including stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Sackett et al., 2004), fear of “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), and future expectations (Cunningham, Corprew, & Becker, 2009; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Stereotype threat refers to the theory that one’s underperformance may stem from the worry of being judged or treated negatively due to the stereotypes of one’s group or fulfilling those stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When “acting White” one is perceived as denying their minority identity by behaving in ways that are congruent with the majority culture, which often includes studying in the library and getting good grades (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Unlike stereotype threat and “acting white,” which are theories directly related to race, future expectations refers to one’s belief of who one will become and what might occur in the future. In general, stereotype threat and fear of “acting white” have been viewed as potential barriers to achievement among Black youth. In contrast, the concept of future expectations has been applied more widely, although research on future expectations as related to educational achievement among Latinos is still in its early stages.

The concept of future expectations has been studied as an aspect of adolescent’s *possible selves*, the future oriented aspect of one’s self-concept that is believed to serve as a motivational source and guide to behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves measures typically involve having adolescents describe what they hope for and fear they will be like in the future using open-ended questions that are later coded for content (see Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006 for a review). Through one’s possible selves, people are able to project who they would like to be (and not be) in the future, which is presumed to create a goal to work towards. Consistent with this assumption, adolescents’ possible selves do predict increases in grade point average (Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger, 1999). Similarly, students’ educational aspirations in 9th and 12th grade are correlated positively to their academic outcomes during early adulthood (Crockett & Beal, 2012). Although these studies suggest that having educational future goals is linked to actual achievement, many students are not likely to reach their desired goals without proper planning and interventions that provide them the appropriate strategies (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

Future expectations and the educational expectations of Latinos

Possible selves research has shown group differences in the number of adolescents reporting educational or occupational goals, with White students reporting higher education expectations more often than students of color (Anderman et al., 1999; see Oyserman &

Fryberg, 2006 for a review). Studies including only Latino adolescents have found that youth report academic future expectations more than any other type (Cansler, Updegraff, & Simpkins, 2012; Yowell, 2000, 2002); however, these studies only examined Latinos and thus do not speak to group differences. In a review of the possible selves literature, Oyserman and Fryberg (2006) concluded that Latino youth appear less likely to hold educational future expectations than youth from other backgrounds, although comparative studies are still limited.

Although these studies are informative, they do not provide insight into the context or potential meaning of higher education future goals, and how these may differ by race/ethnicity because of cultural influences. For example, the cultural values of *familismo* or *ser buen educado* may lead Latino adolescents to hold more social future goals when compared to youth from other backgrounds, such as starting a family or having a romantic partner. These goals may indirectly impact educational achievement (e.g., starting a family may inhibit educational attainment). Thus, it is important to examine not only group differences in future educational goals, but also differences in the types of goals given in addition to or instead of higher education.

Relatedly, youth may have the same goals for the future, but have different reasons for that goal. For example, one student may want to go to college in order to help out his family whereas another student may want to go to college to be out on her own and have independence. Research on future expectations has not examined themes or reasoning that also may be part of responses (e.g., individuation, family assistance, materialism). These are important themes during the adolescent years, and they may lead youth of different backgrounds to navigate this developmental period in specific ways that reflect cultural values or norms (Greenfield et al., 2003). For example, Latino adolescents report more family obligation than White youth (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999), which may in turn influence decisions they make about pursuing higher education (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995) and employment (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002). Although generally not studied, the reasons why a student wants to be in higher education or in a certain job in the future likely impacts whether he or she reaches this goal. Moreover, programs aimed at promoting higher education among diverse youth are likely to be more effective if underlying values associated with different future goals are incorporated.

Another important consideration of the content of adolescent's future expectations is how realistic the envisioned self is in the projected timeline. A high school student may picture himself in medical school working to be a doctor in a year's time. If this student is only in high school, however, this expectation is not realistic. Students who live in families and communities where few adults have gone to college may have a less clear understanding of what college involves, even if they envision themselves pursuing higher education (Abraham, Lujan, López, & Walker, 2002; Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011). These types of inaccuracies may impact the likelihood of achieving a stated future goal. Most studies, however, have not examined whether the type of educational or occupational future expectation described was—in fact—attainable or realistic within the allotted period.

Finally, the underlying assumption in much of the future expectations literature as applied to educational achievement is that having an academic future expectation is desirable and positive. However, this may not always be the case for students of color. In explaining their possible selves theory, Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed that one's future expectations may contribute to psychological adjustment as these expectations have positive (e.g., graduating, having money, etc.) or negative (e.g., being a loser, doing drugs) valences. More importantly, these goals may be viewed as unattainable or unavoidable, which changes the

emotional implications that the goals may carry. For example, if an adolescent wishes to attend college but is unsure of the application process, is unable to afford college, or does not feel supported by family members in this endeavor, postsecondary education may then become a stressful, saddening, or anxiety-provoking goal. Similarly, given different cultural values, higher education goals may have different implications for psychological well-being for adolescents of different racial/ethnic groups (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002).

Much also has been written about the potential negative consequences of academic achievement among Black youth (e.g., “acting white”; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer & Torelli, 2006). The basis for this assumption is that Black youth who are high achievers in school face negative peer consequences, including being accused of trying to be better than others or “acting white.” There has been debate about whether this process actually occurs in schools, and it may be only in integrated schools in which there are negative consequences of achievement for students of color (Fryer & Torelli, 2006). Nonetheless, this line of inquiry highlights how there may be negative consequences for youth of color when they act in ways that seem inconsistent among family or peers. For example, Black students accused of “acting white” report greater symptoms of anxiety than peers who have not faced the same accusations (Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings, & Stadulis, 2012).

Among Latino families, there is evidence that having more individualistic goals than parents may be a source of acculturative stress and family conflict for adolescents (Hwang & Wood, 2009; Lau, McCabe, & Yeh, 2005). *Familismo* may compel Latino youth to feel torn between helping their family financially versus exercising their autonomy by attending college, as many Latino youth report desires to attend college, as well as the need to support their family as the reason for not doing so (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Additionally, the need to be respectful to elders, an aspect of *ser buen educado*, may lead adolescents to do what their family thinks is best, rather than pursue their own goals. If this is the case, then having academic future goals may be a source of stress for Latino youth if it creates conflict with parents or family members, who may have different goals for their children. Thus, we also examine whether having academic future goals is differentially associated with emotional distress or mental health among Latino adolescents compared to their Black and White peers.

Current Study

The goal of this study is to provide a richer contextual picture of future expectations as they may relate to educational achievement, particularly among Latinos. Specifically, this study builds on existing findings by addressing three research questions.

First, do future expectations differ by race/ethnicity? In particular, do Latino students differ from White and Black youth in holding higher education future expectations or in types of future goals (e.g. social, starting family) that may influence academic achievement? Although there is evidence that youth of color hold fewer academic expectations than White youth, fewer studies have compared Latinos with both White and Black youth from similar economic backgrounds. There is also reason to believe that Latino youth may have more social future goals because of cultural values such as *familismo* and *ser buen educado*. Thus, we examine not only educational goals but also alternative goals that may be particularly important among Latino adolescents.

Second, do adolescents’ future expectation responses differ in theme (e.g., family assistance, individuation, materialism, negativistic) and how realistic they are by race/ethnicity, particularly in regards to higher education? Latino adolescents report more family obligation than youth from other backgrounds (e.g., Fuligni et al., 1999); however, less is known about how developmental themes such as family obligation and individuation may be tied to future

educational goals. Similarly, students from different backgrounds may hold the same broad future expectation (e.g., higher education), but differ in what they believe pursuing this goal involves.

Third, how do higher education future expectations relate to emotional adjustment, and does this differ by race/ethnicity? Higher educational goals are generally viewed as positive pursuits for adolescents. The meaning of this goal is likely shaped by cultural, social, and economic contextual factors. Consequently, the relationship between higher education goals and psychological well-being may be moderated by race/ethnicity.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants for this study were drawn from a larger study ($n=537$) of ninth grade students attending a large, diverse urban high school in a low income, central Connecticut city. The larger sample reflected about 84% of all eligible 9th grade students. In the school population, the majority of the student body comes from low-income households and 79% qualify for free/reduced-price lunch. About 40% of the students have a non-English speaking home and 10% participate in bilingual education and ESL services. A large group of students are from immigrant families, with the majority of these newcomers being from Latin America and Poland. The current sample was comprised of the 375 ninth graders who answered the future expectation question, the item of interest for this study. Because of an unscheduled early dismissal, a subset of students were not able complete both days of the survey. Students with and without the future expectation survey item did not differ on any demographic factors.

Participants were 14 to 17 years old with a mean age of 14.92 ($SD = 0.65$) and an equal proportion of boys ($n=185$) and girls ($n=190$). The sample was 49% Latino (88% Puerto Rican, 5% Mexican, 4% Central American, 2% Dominican), 23% White (30% 1st or 2nd generation Polish), 22% Black (20% 1st or 2nd generation Jamaican, 15% 1st or 2nd generation African) and 6% other. The “other” category included adolescents who identified as Arabic, Asian, and multiracial. Genders were represented equally within each racial/ethnic group. Students included in the current sample broadly matched their high school population which, according to school demographic data, includes 45% Latino, 30% White, and 20% Black students. About 85% of students reported living with their biological mother and 48% reported living with their biological father. Based on student reports, 18% of the students had mothers with less than a high school degree, 53% with a high school degree, and 16% with a bachelor’s degree; 13% of the students reported not knowing. For fathers, 21% of the students had fathers without a high school degree, 45% with a high school degree, and 10% with a bachelor’s degree; 24% reported not knowing.

The grade-wide survey was conducted in conjunction with the school-based health center (SBHC) at the high school, which serves as primary care provider to 70% of the student population. The purpose of the survey was to obtain information about health knowledge and behaviors in order to refine the health class curriculum and to develop more targeted health promotion services within the school. Data were collected through anonymous in-class surveys administered during all of the regularly scheduled health classes, a required course for ninth grade students and one in which students in ESL and special education participate. After receiving a verbal and written description of the purpose of the study, as well as the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study, students were given time to ask questions. Students then signed a written consent form, which was collected separately from de-identified surveys. Students were given the option of completing alternative Health curriculum materials during the class period, although no students did so. The survey included various questions on health knowledge and behaviors, emotional stress, future

goals, and demographic information. Because the survey was anonymous and collected for the purpose of curriculum development by school personnel, parental consent was not required. However, parents were informed that students would be participating in an anonymous survey in health class and given a choice to refuse their child's participation. No parents did so. The school administration and University of Connecticut's Institutional Review Board approved the study design and procedures.

Measures

Future Expectations Question—Students responded to the open-ended future expectation question, “Picture what you would like to be doing 5 YEARS FROM NOW. Please write a few sentences about what you think your life will be like at that time.” Responses were later typed verbatim into a separate file, and then coded by two trained, independent research assistants blind to all other information. Content codes previously used in possible selves studies include school achievement, interpersonal relationships, jobs, material goods and negative selves such as “homeless,” “junkie,” etc. (Oyserman et al., 2004; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). In the current study, codes were based on these previous content codes and were also made more explicit. For example, in this study the broad category of interpersonal relationships was separated into 3 categories (romantic, own family, and social) to gather more detailed information about this social domain. Moreover, additional codes (individuation, family assistance) were added a priori to reflect themes or tones in the response (see Table 1). These categories were deemed relevant to adolescent development given the centrality of seeking autonomy during this period, coupled with the idea that families of color may navigate this developmental period differently due to cultural differences (Greenfield, 2003; Fuligni et al., 1999). Lastly, an unrealistic category was used to examine students' responses and understandings of what might be possible to accomplish in five years, considering research that shows adolescents from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods might not have a good understanding of paths to achieving future goals (Oyserman et al., 2011).

Responses were coded into area categories, which were not mutually exclusive, including: Academic, Higher Education, Work, Specific Career, Romantic, Own Family, and Social. Students' responses could receive more than one content code (e.g., “I will be going to college and working part time”). They were also coded for themes including: Individuation, Family Assistance, Materialistic, and Negativistic. Theme codes were given only when the participant explicitly responded in a way that expressed that theme (e.g., “I will be making lots of money and driving a Mercedes”; “I plan to be in a good job so I can help out my family”). In addition, all responses were also coded on a 0–2 scale for how realistic they were for the given amount of time of “5 years from now”, with 0 being realistic (e.g. freshman in college), 1 being unlikely but not impossible (e.g. starting point guard for Duke University), and 2 being unrealistic/impossible given the time frame (e.g., working as a pediatrician). Given the low number of 2's and to increase reliability across coders, responses of 1 and 2 were collapsed into one unrealistic category. As shown in Table 1, coding yielded good to high Kappas values for most categories, with moderate values for family assistance (Landis & Koch, 1977). Disagreements for all codes were resolved by a consensus meeting between two doctoral students and a Ph.D. faculty not involved in the first coding.

Depressive Symptoms—Using criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV; APA, 1994), the Adolescent Psychopathology Scale (APS; Reynolds, 1998) is a self-report measure that evaluates a broad array of psychological disorders and distress in adolescents 12–19 years old. Questions measuring suicidality were excluded at the request of the school. Twelve items ($\alpha = .916$) were used, with

a response format that included three options for evaluating their frequency of occurrence over the past two weeks. Answer choices were 1 = almost never, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = nearly every day. Mean scores were calculated for each participant with higher scores indicating a greater amount of depressive symptoms. Extensive evidence supporting the measure's reliability and validity has been reported (Reynolds, 1998).

Emotional Distress—A widely used self-report measure, the Brief Symptom Inventory - S (BSI-S; Derogatis, 1993) screens psychological symptom patterns of mental health difficulties in three domains: Anxiety, Depression, and Hostility. Eighteen items (= .934) from these scales were aggregated to reflect emotional distress (and reflect the BSI-S scale). The items were rated on a scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = extremely, indicating how much the adolescent felt bothered by the problem in the past 7 days including that day. Mean scores were calculated for each participant with higher scores indicating a greater amount of emotional distress. The BSI has also demonstrated sound psychometric properties (Derogatis, 1993).

Demographic Characteristics—Students self reported on race/ethnicity and country-of-origin for themselves and their parents. They also reported on languages spoken in the household, family structure, and parental education level.

Data Analysis

To address RQ1 and RQ2 about racial/ethnic differences in the content and themes of future expectations, chi-square tests were conducted to examine overall racial/ethnic differences in the 7 categories of future goals and the 4 categories of themes/tones. In categories that differed in chi-square analysis, logistic regression was used to explore specific racial/ethnic group differences controlling for demographic factors. To examine whether gender moderated effects, logistic regression was used to test for race/ethnicity and gender interactions in the likelihood of each type of future goal following Jaccard (2001). To address RQ3, how higher education future expectations relate to emotional adjustment by race/ethnicity, a Multivariate ANCOVA was used with the three categories of race/ethnicity (Latino, Black, White) and two levels of higher education future expectation (yes, no) as independent variables. Dependent variables included the APS Major Depression Subscale and the BSI emotional distress scores, again with demographic factors as covariates. Follow-up univariate F tests were conducted to determine the nature of significant MANCOVA results.

Results

Preliminary analyses examined the frequency of responses for each category of coded future goals. Across the sample, the most commonly cited future expectations were academic, further education, career, and work. Gender differences were found for romantic and own family future expectations and mentioning individuation as a theme. Specifically, girls were more likely than boys to endorse having their own children and family (13% vs. 5%, $\chi^2(1, n = 360) = 6.96, p < .05$) and being in a romantic relationship (16% vs. 9%, $\chi^2(1, n = 360) = 3.73, p < .05$). Girls also were much more likely to specifically express a desire to move away from their current family as part of their response, regardless of whether they indicated this happening through education, occupation, or starting their own family (22% vs. 13%, $\chi^2(1, n = 360) = 5.28, p < .05$).

Besides gender, only maternal education level was associated with any future expectation. Since no other demographic factors (e.g., parental education, parent marital status, language,

family size) were related to outcomes, only gender and maternal education were used as covariates in subsequent analysis.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Future Expectations Content

The next set of analyses examined racial/ethnic differences in future expectations. Table 2 presents the frequencies of endorsement of each category by race/ethnicity and results from chi-square analyses of overall group difference. Logistic regression was then used to explore specific group differences controlling for parent educational level and gender. Within logistic regression analyses, race/ethnicity was coded so that the White and Black subsamples were compared to the Latino group. In terms of specific types of goals, racial/ethnic differences were found for higher education and own family goals. Specifically, Latinos were less likely to hold higher education expectations than Black students (57.2% vs. 72.8%, AOR=0.55 [0.31–0.99]) and White students (57.2% and 80.4%, AOR=0.34 [0.19–0.63]). For own family future expectations, a greater percentage of Latino students mentioned having children and their own family in five years than did White students at 13.3% and 4.1% (AOR=3.42 [1.14–10.28]), respectively. However, Latinos did not differ significantly than Blacks in this category (13.3% vs. 4.9%, AOR=2.54 [0.84–7.72]), although their rate of endorsement was over twice as high.

Because Latinos were least likely to report expecting to be in school in five years and most likely to report having their own family, follow-up analyses were conducted to examine if Latino students gave a goal of having their own family as an alternative to higher education, or in addition to higher education. Among Latino youth who did not endorse higher education, 21% stated having an own family future expectation; in contrast, only 8% of Latino students who endorsed expectations for higher education also expressed a desire to have their own family in five years $\chi^2(1, n = 180) = 6.32, p=.01$. This finding suggests that having your own family is more often viewed as an alternative rather than co-occurring expectation among Latinos.

As a follow-up analysis, we also tested whether contents differed within the Latino subsample by proxies of acculturation status, including nativity and language spoken at home. No within group differences were found.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Future Expectation Themes

In addition to differences in content of future expectations, we also examined differences in themes (i.e., individuation, family assistance, materialism, negativistic) and how realistic goals were. Thirty-four percent of participants had a response that was coded for some theme. Latino (39%) and Black (34%) students had themes in their responses more often than White students (23%), $\chi^2(2, n = 360) = 7.16, p=.01$. As shown in Table 2, racial/ethnic differences were seen in individuation and materialistic themes. Latino adolescents endorsed individuation goals more often than did White adolescents (20.4% vs. 9.3%, AOR=2.55 [1.17–5.57]), but not more than did Black adolescents (20.4% vs. 21.0%, AOR=0.94 [0.49–1.82]). This same pattern was exhibited with the materialistic theme. More Latino students stated materialistic goals than White students at 10.5% and 1.1% (AOR=10.99 [1.44–84.09]), respectively; however, Latino and Black adolescents did not differ significantly (10.5% vs. 7.8%, AOR=1.43 [0.54–3.84]). These results suggest similarities between Latino and Black students in individual and materialistic future goals, with both of these two groups giving responses that included these themes more than White students. No differences were found in family assistance or negativistic tones in responses. In general, these themes were uncommon.

As a post-hoc exploratory analysis, the association between endorsement of higher education future expectation and each of the four themes within each racial/ethnic group was examined. Specifically, we examined whether higher education was more closely associated with individuation, family assistance, materialism, or negativistic themes for a particular racial/ethnic group to explore the possibility that higher education goals mean something different to Latino youth. The differing sample sizes limit power to detect differences within the three racial/ethnic subsamples; however, effect sizes were considered in interpretation. Results are presented in Table 3.

Higher education was not associated with family assistance or negativistic themes for any racial/ethnic group, although the low rate of these themes limits interpretation. Higher education goals were associated with materialism and individualism. Across all groups, youth who endorsed higher education goals were less likely to express materialistic themes than youth who did not endorse higher education goals. This difference was significant for Latino and Black youth. Among those who did not report higher education goals, 20.8% of Latino and 20% of Black youth had materialistic themes in their responses. In contrast, among those who did report higher education goals, 3.1% of Latino and 3.0% of Black youth had materialism themes. In other words, among students of color, youth who did not have higher education goals were more likely to explicitly state materialistic future goals in their response.

Higher education expectations also were associated significantly with individuation themes, but only for Latino students. Latino students who held a higher education expectation were more likely than those who did not have higher education goals to explicitly express individuation goals, $\chi^2(1, n = 180) = 4.72, p < .05$. It is worth noting that, although Black and Latino youth were equally likely to express individuation desires, individuation was related differentially to higher education for the two groups. Black youth with and without higher education expectations were equally likely to express individuation themes in their response (20% vs. 23%). In contrast, among Latinos, youth with higher education goals were twice as likely to express individuation desires as youth without higher education goals (26% vs. 13%). Across all youth, Latinos who imagined higher education in their future were the most likely to explicitly describe individuation within their response, suggesting that the desire to attend college may mean something different to Latino youth compared to other adolescents.

In addition to developmental themes, responses were coded for how realistic or attainable they were given the stated timeline. Unrealistic future goals were fairly common, with 28% of students giving a response that was deemed at least somewhat unrealistic. Latino students did not differ significantly in giving unrealistic responses than Black students (31.3% vs. 32.5%, AOR=0.93 [0.53–1.64]), but were more likely to respond with an unrealistic goal than White youth (31.3% vs. 16.5%, AOR=2.26 [1.21–4.21]). Among youth who gave higher education goals, 15% had responses that were coded as unrealistic. This rate did not differ by race/ethnicity. Among all the content codes, unrealistic codes were most often given to responses focusing on career goals, with 45% of these responses judged as being unrealistic. Among youth who stated a specific career in their future expectation, 52% of Latino, 50% of Black, and 22% of White students gave goals judged as unrealistic, $\chi^2(2, n = 161) = 9.53, p < .01$.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Academic Future Expectations and Emotional Adjustment

Although having higher education goals is generally thought to be associated with better adjustment, this may not be the case for different racial/ethnic groups if educational goals have different meanings (e.g., separation from families). The final set of analyses examined whether the relationship between higher education future expectations and emotional

adjustment differed by race/ethnicity. MANCOVA was used to test this possibility, with race/ethnicity and academic future expectations used as independent variables and emotional adjustment variables as dependent variables, controlling for parents' educational level and gender. There were no significant main effects of race [$F=0.91$ (4, 654) $p=.46$] or higher education future expectations [$F=1.42$ (2, 327) $p=.24$]; however, there was a significant interaction [$F=3.67$ (4, 654) $p=.006$]. As shown in Table 4, the interaction was evident for both the BSI emotional distress [$F=7.32$ (2, 328) $p=.001$] and APS depression [$F=4.09$ (2, 328) $p=.018$]. Specifically, having a higher education goal was related to having a more positive emotional adjustment for Black and White youth when compared to youth who did not have higher education goals. In contrast, Latino youth who endorsed a higher education goal demonstrated worse emotional adjustment than Latino youth without stated higher education goals.

Discussion

This study examined racial/ethnic differences in the types of future expectations held by high school freshmen projecting five years into the future. Previous studies have shown that students of color are less likely than White students to endorse higher education goals, and this may be one factor that contributes to lower educational achievement among students of color (Anderman et al., 1999). This study extends existing research on future expectations in youth of color by focusing specifically on Latinos and providing a more complete picture of aspects of academic future expectations that may interfere with or promote educational attainment. More specifically, this study extends existing findings in four ways.

First, instead of looking only at education and employment related expectations, we also examined another domain of future expectations: socially oriented goals (e.g., getting married or living with a romantic partner, having children, being with friends, etc.). Given evidence of an increased interdependent focus among Latinos, this additional type of future expectation may be especially relevant among Latino youth. Second, we examined various themes evident within future expectation responses. In particular, we examined whether adolescents' responses included themes like autonomy strivings, family assistance, uncertainty, materialism, or negativity based on the assumption that adolescents of different racial and ethnic groups may endorse the same type of goal (e.g., "I will be in college") but for different reasons (e.g., "I will be in college so I can be on my own" vs. "I will be in college so I can get a job to help my family out"). To date, however, the notion of different themes associated with future expectations has not been examined. Finally, we examined whether having an education related goal is differentially linked to emotional adjustment for Latino, Black, and White students. While focusing on higher education is generally assumed to be a positive indicator of adjustment, this may not be true for youth of all racial and ethnic groups; however, this possibility has not been explored in the future expectations literature.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Future Expectations Content

Consistent with previous research (Oyserman et al., 2004; Shepard & Marshall, 1999), the content of the adolescents' future expectations centered on educational and work-oriented aspirations, regardless of race. The majority of students in each racial/ethnic category did identify an academic future goal and a higher education future goal. However, significant differences by race/ethnicity were found in that Latinos held such expectations at lower rates than did Black and White students. Given previous literature (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006), this difference between Latino and White students was expected. However, it is notable that, even among students of color, Latino students were less likely than Black students to endorse higher education expectations. In this sample, both groups faced similar socioeconomic challenges, yet fewer Latino students envisioned education in their futures. Indeed, in Connecticut, Latino students fare worse than Black students in regards to high

school graduation rates with 54% versus 64%, respectively, graduating within 4 years in 2008 (EPE Research Center, 2011). This data demonstrates that Latino students, and perhaps Puerto Rican students in particular, may be a vulnerable population in need of more tailored interventions to address educational disparities.

In contrast, no racial/ethnic differences were found in the work or specific career goals. This may mean that students equally picture a future that involves work or some kind of career, but that Latinos may be less likely to see themselves in an educational setting in pursuit of these work goals. Alternatively, these findings suggest that Latino students may hold other types of future expectations. Consistent with this latter idea, Latinos were more likely to endorse goals that were socially oriented. These socially-oriented goals may be more significant or more desired than educational goals or may compete with the ability to continue their education.

Latino youth endorsed having their own family in five years significantly more often than White and Black youth. Although only a small portion of Latino youth in general described having their own children and family as a future expectation, it was at far greater rates than did other youth (13.3% Latino vs. 4.9% Black and 4.1% White). Further, this pattern was found regardless of gender, showing that Latino boys also held their own family expectations at greater rates than did Black and White boys. This finding is congruent with national statistics demonstrating that, while overall teen birth rates decreased from 1981 to 2006, birth rates for Latina teens increased (Wingo, Smith, Tevendale, & Ferré, 2011). Similarly, results from a Pew Hispanic Center study (2009) show that Latino youth reported younger ideal ages for having a first child compared to youth from other backgrounds. This difference could be due to specific cultural factors of Latinos, such as *familismo*, which emphasizes strong family ties and the importance of family. In this context, having a family may be seen as a highly regarded goal for the future, and a viable alternative to higher education as a path to adulthood. While the desire to have a family at a younger age may be rooted in positive cultural values, the link between early parenthood and chronic poverty is well-established.

Racial/ethnic Differences in Future Expectations Themes

In this study, different “themes” relevant to the adolescent period also were coded with the idea that students could give future goals with similar content (e.g., working) but associate different meaning to it (e.g., feeling negative or positive, doing it to be away from family or for materialistic goals, etc.). Four developmentally relevant themes were coded: individuation (i.e., autonomy strivings), family assistance, materialism (i.e., wanting nice things), and negativistic. Racial and ethnic differences emerged in individuation and materialism.

Latino and Black adolescents endorsed the individuation goal more often than did White adolescents. This finding was counterintuitive given that Latino and Black families are typically thought to have more collectivistic attitudes (Triandis, 1989). However, although Latinos do seem to be higher on collectivism than Blacks and Whites, Black Americans actually have been found to be higher on individualism than Latinos and White Americans (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Further, thinking about the transition to adulthood might cue-up a more individualistic mindset for Black youth, leading to a greater endorsement of individuation (Oyserman, 2011). Yet, values such as *familismo*, which may be reflective of collectivism in Latino culture, may be why Latino students stated an expectation or a hope of living on their own and being independent of their family. Seeking autonomy and individuality from parents is the hallmark of American adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Individuation may be a more salient construct for Latino youth if they regularly have received direct and indirect messages of the importance of staying with

the family. In contrast, in White families, an adolescent's developmentally typical desire for independence may not come into "conflict" with the desires of other family members, and thus be less salient an issue.

Although Latino and Black youth were equally likely to express individuation goals, there was one important difference. For Black youth, the desire for higher education was not associated with individuation goals, with 21% of youth who stated higher education goals and 20% of youth who did not state higher education goals including individuation themes in their response. In contrast, the desire for higher education and individuation were linked for Latino youth: Latino adolescents who expressed higher education goals were twice as likely as youth without higher education goals to include individuation in their response (26% vs. 13%). This finding implies that pursuing an education after high school may mean something different to Latino adolescents: going to college might also mean separating from family. The belief that higher education inevitably causes one to leave home may create conflict and distress for Latino families, especially when considering cultural values like *familismo*.

There were also racial/ethnic differences in materialistic themes, with Latino and Black youth again more likely to have responses with this type of theme present. This code was given when students specifically said something like "I'll be rich and have a nice car" or "I'll be living in a mansion", or another response that specifically described a desire for material wealth and possessions. Although we controlled for some markers of socioeconomic differences (e.g., parental education) we did not have comprehensive information on family SES. In the larger community, families of color do have lower incomes than White families. Consequently, the desire for material wealth may be the result of a lack of material resources now. Interestingly, for both Latino and Black youth, materialistic responses were given more often by youth who did not also state expecting to go on to higher education. Thus, higher education may not be viewed as a path to acquire material goods for many adolescents of color. This may be reflective of youth of color's understanding of how one earns large sums of money for these material goods. Perhaps they believe that other venues that may not require many years of education, such as playing professional sports, will allow for greater material goods (Simons, 1997). Moreover, students with educational expectations may not be pursuing these goals for material gain, but instead for genuine interest in a specific academic field or career.

Finally, Latino and Black students were more likely than White students to give responses judged as potentially unrealistic, although these two groups did not differ. Most often, this code was given when students responded that in five years they would be in an established career in a field that requires years of study beyond college, such as a lawyer or pediatrician. These outcomes would be impossible in five years given that participants were freshmen in high school. This finding is consistent with other research demonstrating that low-income youth of color often lack the knowledge of what is involved in certain career goals, especially those that require advanced educations (Abraham et al., 2002; Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Particularly among male students, unrealistic responses also often included athletic accomplishments unlikely for any 19 or 20 year old, such as being a "starting quarterback in the NFL". While such goals may enhance school involvement through participation in school sports, they may be detrimental to youth of color in the long run (Simons, 1997).

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Academic Future Expectations and Emotional Adjustment

The final analyses demonstrated that there were racial/ethnic differences in the relationship between higher education future expectations and emotional adjustment, with Latino students displaying a different pattern than Black and White youth. Specifically, Black and

White students who did not endorse a higher education future expectation reported more depressive symptoms and emotional distress than peers of the same race who did endorse higher education expectations. In contrast, Latino youth who *did* endorse a higher education possible self had greater levels of depressive symptoms and distress than those who did not. This finding implies that having educational aspirations like attending college might be a source of stress and emotional difficulty for some Latino adolescents in contrast to students of other racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Why might educational future goals be associated with more distress among Latino students? As described above, Latino youth with higher education goals were also significantly more likely to have individuation themes as part of their response when compared to Black and White students. This may mean that Latino students, more so than other students, associate pursuing higher education as leaving home and family or being on your own. This interpretation of what it means to go to college may conflict with desires explicitly or implicitly expressed by parents for the adolescent to stay close to family. This may be one form of intergenerational acculturative stress that leads to emotional distress among Latino adolescents (Hwang & Wood, 2009).

There also may be socio-economic reasons for the association between emotional distress and higher education goals for Latino youth. Latino youth are more likely to live in poverty than any other group (Lopez & Velasco, 2011). Although analyses controlled for broad markers of SES, it is possible that Latino youth actually had fewer economic means or felt more impoverished than youth from other backgrounds in this sample. If so, then Latino students who want to go to college may be more likely to feel that it is not economically feasible, and thus become emotionally distressed at not being able to pursue their goals. Alternatively, some Latino youth may have limits on the ability to go to college because of other external factors, such as their immigration status (i.e., being from an undocumented family). Although the majority of Latino youth in this study were Puerto Rican, the influence of immigration policies on the educational aspirations and achievement of Latino youth is an important area for study.

Practice Implications

Results from this study have implications for educators and clinicians. When working with Latino students, educators need to involve families in discussions about future educational goals, particularly in considering cultural values such as *familismo*. Families and their children should be allowed to express their fears, concerns, and overall beliefs about what it would mean to them if the adolescent pursues higher education. Such conversations should include the topic of family planning, being supportive of students who desire to have children but encouraging them to do so after furthering their own education. Information on the benefits of higher education also should be discussed with a focus on all the possibilities for higher education, including local colleges/universities that allow students to commute while still living at home or to live on campus and frequently visit family if desired. Similarly, youth development programs can help low-income adolescents gain insight into a broader array of possible career paths and the intermediate steps necessary to reach these goals through mentoring, job shadowing, and apprentice programs.

In-school interventions in which students are directed to picture themselves in a successful academic context in the future have been shown to result in improvement in grades, fewer absences, greater concern about doing well in school, and fewer depressive symptoms (Oyserman et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 2006). Similarly, when used as a self-regulation tool with a specific action plan, having students picture an academic possible self helped low-income eighth graders improve their grades, increase time spent on homework and class participation, and decrease referrals to summer school (Oyserman et al., 2004). Thus,

programs in which youth are actively directed to envision an academic future appears to impact aspirations and behaviors. This type of intervention also may be beneficial with Latino youth; however, such efforts need to address simultaneously emotions and meanings that may be associated with higher education in this population. In particular, the pursuit of higher education may come at an emotional cost if this goal is in conflict with other personal, familial, or cultural goals. Mental health workers, especially those serving high school and college students, should consider these factors as potential reasons for distress exhibited by Latino high school students. Finally, it is important for professionals who work with Latinos to conceptualize *familismo* as a strength of families rather than a sign of enmeshment or family problems.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study has many strengths, several limitations should be noted. Like most previous research examining future expectations, this study was cross-sectional. Generalizability may be limited because of the convenience sampling since all participants came from one high school in one city of Connecticut; however, it provides insight into racial/ethnic differences among youth living in similar economic situations. Also, it is important to note that Latinos in this sample were overwhelmingly Puerto Rican. Examining future expectations within groups of Latinos from differing countries of origin might produce different results. Moreover, a sizable minority of Black and White youth in this sample were in 1st or 2nd generation immigrant families, which may have impacted racial/ethnic group comparisons. Relatedly, there has been some evidence that educational aspirations may be associated with more distress in Asian-American youth, although this has been conceptualized as being the result of achievement pressure from family rather than individuation stress (Qin, 2008). A study that looked at interactions between race/ethnicity and educational goals on emotional distress in an even more diverse sample of youth may provide a different picture. Additionally, although a strength of this study is the open-ended nature in which adolescents were allowed to express their goals, the percentage of students who responded with some theme was relatively low. Future studies with a more in-depth qualitative perspective on the meaning of higher education for different youth, in which students are asked to explicitly provide their reasons for certain goals, would offer additional insight into potential cultural differences. Also, though the Kappa value of family assistance was in the moderate range, the lack of greater interrater reliability may limit interpretation in this study. Finally, more longitudinal research should be conducted to see if and how adolescent future expectations are linked to actual adult outcomes and if that differs by race/ethnicity.

This study extends research on future expectations and academic disparities among Latinos in several ways. First, we examined goals beyond academic and career oriented, including more social goals that may be particularly important to diverse youth. Similarly, we coded for themes in addition to content, which can help determine if types of future expectations (e.g., education, work) have different meaning (e.g., as a means for individuation, family assistance, or material gain) for youth of different backgrounds. Finally, we also found that race/ethnicity moderated the link between educational future goals and emotional adjustment, highlighting the importance of considering the different meaning of higher education for diverse youth. In these three ways, this study provides a more contextualized understanding of future expectations and how these may impact subsequent educational achievement for Latinos. Educational disparities have a considerable cost to individuals, communities, and families. Understanding psychological factors that contribute to these disparities is an important step in delivering interventions that are developmentally and culturally tailored to adolescents of diverse backgrounds.

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Table 1**Operational Definitions of Coded Content and Themes**

Category	Definition	% Agreement	Kappa
Content			
Academic	Mentioned graduating or finishing school in general (e.g., "I'll be done with high school")	95%	.89
Higher Education	Specifically stated attendance in higher education institution beyond high school (e.g., "I'll be in my first year at UConn")	94%	.88
Work	Mentioned having a job or working (e.g., "I'll be working part time")	89%	.74
Specific Career	Specifically stated a particular field or career as part of school or work (e.g., "I'll be working as a hair stylist and then have my own salon")	81%	.63
Romantic	Mentioned having a boyfriend, girlfriend, being married (e.g., "I'll be living with my boyfriend in Florida")	99%	.92
Own Family	Stated having own children (e.g., "In five years, I'll have two girls, hopefully twins")	98%	.89
Social	Mentioned relationships with friends (e.g., "I'll be hanging out with my friends having a good time")	94%	.68
Theme			
Individuation	Specifically stated being away from family, being on own (e.g., "I'll have my own apartment away from my family")	91%	.72
Family Assistance	Specifically stated helping family, working to provide for parents (e.g., "I'll be working so I can help my mother out with my younger brother")	92%	.51
Materialistic	Specifically stated material success (e.g., "I'll have lots of money and a nice car")	95%	.75
Negativistic	Specifically stated expectations of something bad (e.g., "I'll probably be dead")	97%	.67
Unrealistic	Content of response not realistic in the allotted time period (e.g., "In 5 years, I'll be working as a pediatrician helping children with disabilities")	91%	.71

Table 2

Frequency of Responses for Each Category of Coded Possible Selves by Race/Ethnicity

Category	Overall	Latino (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	χ^2 (df=2)
Content					
Academic	70.7%	60.2	75.3	86.5	21.92 *
Higher Education	66.9%	57.2	72.8	80.4	16.50 *
Work	34.5%	36.9	30.9	33.0	1.02
Specific Career	44.7%	48.3	47.5	35.4	4.56
Romantic	12.5%	13.7	9.9	12.4	.765
Own Family	8.9%	13.3	4.9	4.1	8.53 *
Social	9.2%	9.4	7.4	10.3	0.47
Theme and Tone					
Individuation	17.5%	20.4	21.0	9.3	6.30 *
Family Assistance	5.0%	4.4	2.5	8.2	3.37
Materialistic	7.4%	10.5	7.8	1.1	7.85 *
Negativistic	2.5%	2.7	3.7	1.0	1.39
Unrealistic	27.7%	31.3	32.1	16.5	8.08 *

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as participants could receive a code for more than one category.

* p<.05

Table 3

Percent students with specific themes by higher education goals and race/ethnicity

EDUCATIONAL FUTURE GOALS			
Race/ Ethnicity	Yes Higher Education	No Higher Education	χ^2 (df=1)
<i>% with individuation in response</i>			
Latino	26.2%	13.0%	4.72 *
Black	20.3%	22.7%	0.06
White	9.5%	5.6%	0.28
<i>% with family assistance in response</i>			
Latino	6.9%	1.3%	3.18
Black	1.7%	4.5%	0.54
White	6.8%	11.1%	0.39
<i>% with materialism in response</i>			
Latino	3.1%	20.8%	13.85 **
Black	3.5%	20.0%	5.60 *
White	1.4%	0.0%	0.21

*
p<.05**
p<.01

Table 4
Emotional Adjustment Differences by Race With and Without Higher Education Possible Selves

Race/Ethnicity	BSI Distress				Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Yes Higher Education		No Higher Education		
	<i>n</i>	M (SD)	<i>n</i>	M (SD)	
Latino	98	5.88 (2.33)	75	5.08 (2.20)	0.35
Black	55	5.02 (1.66)	19	6.61 (2.79)	-0.79
White	71	5.21 (2.03)	18	5.73 (2.39)	-0.25
	APS Depression				Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Yes Higher Education		No Higher Education		
	<i>n</i>	M (SD)	<i>n</i>	M (SD)	
Latino	98	7.65 (5.38)	75	5.89 (4.12)	0.36
Black	55	6.01 (4.22)	19	8.10 (4.49)	-0.49
White	71	6.01 (4.38)	18	6.24 (4.85)	-0.07