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Perceived Discrimination and Ethnic Affirmation: Anglo Culture Orientation as a Moderator Among Mexican-Origin Adolescent Mothers

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Abstract

The current study examined whether Anglo culture orientation modified the association between adolescents' perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation over time in a sample of Mexican-origin adolescent mothers ($N = 205$, M age = 16.24 years). Results indicated that perceived ethnic discrimination was significantly associated with decreases in ethnic identity affirmation over time for adolescents reporting high Anglo culture orientation, but no relation existed for adolescents reporting low Anglo culture orientation. Findings suggest that a person-environment mismatch (i.e., between adolescents' perceptions of their connection to Anglo culture and the messages they receive from others regarding that connection in terms of perceived ethnic discrimination) may be detrimental to adolescents' development of positive feelings about their ethnicity.

Adolescent pregnancy continues to be a prevalent public health concern in the United States, especially for Latina youth. Longitudinal work has noted that although adolescent mothers can exhibit many different paths to adulthood, the majority experience poorer mental health, relational problems, heightened substance use, and financial struggle (Oxford et al., 2005). While overall rates of births to teenage mothers have declined by over 30% in recent years for the total population, there has been a decline of only 15% for Latina mothers (Ryan, Franzetta, & Manlove, 2005). In particular, Mexican-origin adolescents face the highest risk for teenage pregnancy among all ethnic and racial groups in the U.S. (Ryan et al., 2005). Given this prevalence and high risk for maladjustment, it is critical to understand factors that inform positive developmental outcomes for Mexican-origin adolescent mothers. Specific to Latino adolescents, ethnic identity has been identified as an indicator of positive youth development (Umaña-Taylor, 2004), and ethnic identity affirmation (i.e., positive feelings toward one's ethnic group) in particular, has been consistently associated with positive well-being in studies that have included or focused specifically on Latinos (e.g., Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005).

In a separate, yet related, body of work, perceived ethnic discrimination has been identified as a potential risk to Latino youths' positive development (e.g., Flores, Tschann, Dimas,

Pasch, & de Groat, 2010; Hwang & Goto, 2008). Thus, it follows that perceived ethnic discrimination may pose a significant threat to Mexican-origin adolescent mothers' ethnic identity affirmation (i.e., an indicator of positive development). The current study examined the association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation and, importantly, the conditions under which ethnic identity affirmation may be most vulnerable to the deleterious effects of perceived ethnic discrimination.

Existing studies with Latino adults and adolescents that examined the association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation (or a similar measure of individuals' positive affect regarding their ethnic group membership) have produced mixed results: some found a positive association (e.g., Cronin, Levin, Branscombe, van Laar, & Tropp, 2012), some found a negative association (e.g., Armenta & Hunt, 2009; Romero & Roberts, 2003), and others found no association (e.g., Pahl & Way, 2006). Consistent with the notion that ethnic identity affirmation is largely informed by contextual factors (e.g., Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004), it is possible that moderational processes may have been overlooked in previous work. This notion is consistent with person-environment fit theory (Eccles et al. 1993; Hunt, 1975), which suggests that individuals' outcomes are the result of the fit between individuals' characteristics and their environments. From a person-environment fit perspective, the impact of perceived ethnic discrimination on ethnic identity affirmation may depend on contextual factors such as the congruence (or dissonance) between adolescents' perceptions of their connection to Anglo culture and the messages they receive from others regarding that connection (e.g., perceived ethnic discrimination would send the message that one is a cultural outsider). The current study examined this possibility and hypothesized that the negative effects of perceived ethnic discrimination on ethnic identity affirmation would be evident only when adolescents were more strongly oriented toward Anglo culture (i.e., person-environment mismatch); when adolescents reported low levels of orientation toward Anglo culture, we did not expect to see an association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation.

Ethnic Identity Affirmation

Ethnic identity is an important aspect of normative development for ethnic minority youth (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992), and has been conceptualized as a multifaceted construct consisting of developmentally driven components (i.e., exploration and resolution), as well as an affective component (i.e., affirmation) that reflects the positive or negative feelings individuals have toward their ethnic group (Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010). Developmental theory (e.g., Erikson, 1968) has largely informed the processes of exploration and resolution with respect to one's identity formation, and scholars have readily applied these notions to ethnic identity specifically (e.g., Phinney & Ong, 2007). The conceptual grounding for the affective component of ethnic identity (i.e., affirmation), which is the focus of the current study, has been based largely on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), which proposes that individuals' concept of self is derived from membership in particular social groups and, specifically, that positive feelings toward one's group are linked to better psychosocial adjustment because they enable individuals to maintain a positive social identity. Indeed, ethnic identity affirmation has been associated with positive

outcomes for Latino youth, such as self-esteem (Romero & Roberts, 2003), satisfaction with life (Ghavami, Fingerhut, Peplau, Grant, & Wittig, 2011), academic attitudes and achievement (Fuligni et al., 2005), as well as interacting with acculturative stress to reduce its negative impact on depressive symptoms (Iturbide, Raffaelli & Carlo, 2009). Therefore, a focus on factors that influence ethnic identity affirmation is especially important for the current sample because adolescent mothers are at-risk for lower self-esteem and higher depression compared to adult mothers (Whitman, Borowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001). Because ethnic identity affirmation has been identified as a significant positive correlate of self-esteem and negative correlate of depressive symptoms, it is particularly useful to understand factors that inform it in a population of adolescent mothers who are at increased risk for maladjustment.

Perceived Ethnic Discrimination

Ethnic discrimination is an experience common to Latinos living in the United States. According to a study that included a diverse sample of Latinos, 50% of late adolescents entering adulthood reported experiencing ethnic discrimination (Pérez, Fortuna, & Alegría, 2008). Scholars have consistently found that perceived ethnic discrimination is associated with negative outcomes for Latino youth, such as depressive symptoms (Edwards & Romero, 2008), post-traumatic stress symptoms (Flores et al., 2010), increased cortisol levels (Zeiders, Doane, & Roosa, 2012), psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and anxiety (Hwang & Goto, 2008).

Prior work has established that perceived ethnic discrimination can have detrimental effects for Latino youths' psychological adjustment; however, it is less clear how perceived ethnic discrimination impacts Latino youths' ethnic identity affirmation. In fact, the body of literature that has examined perceived discrimination and ethnic identity has yielded inconsistent results. According to the rejection-identification model, perceived discrimination from the dominant group is expected to increase individuals' connection with the minority group because it serves as a coping mechanism to deal with the experiences of discrimination and preserve well-being (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). Indeed, empirical work supports this notion among adults from stigmatized groups, such as individuals with piercings (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001), women (Leonardelli & Tormala, 2003), and African Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999). However, findings among Latino youth have been inconsistent. For example, a negative relation was found between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation among Mexican-origin adolescents 11- to 15-years old (Romero & Roberts, 2003). Findings from another study with 9th and 10th grade Latino (77% Mexican-origin) adolescents indicated that there was a significant negative relation between perceived discrimination and affirmation for males, but no significant association for females (Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010). Limited research has examined this relation over time among Latinos. In a rare exception, a longitudinal study of the trajectories of ethnic identity that included Latino adolescents (66% of sample), perceived ethnic discrimination was not related to changes in adolescents' ethnic identity affirmation over time (Pahl & Way, 2006). These inconsistencies suggest that perhaps moderation processes were overlooked. As introduced

below, we propose that the relation between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation may depend on adolescents' orientation to Anglo culture.

Anglo Culture Orientation as a Moderator

Acculturation has been conceptualized as a bidimensional process that involves individuals' maintenance of the heritage culture (e.g., Mexican culture orientation) and adaptation to the affect, cognition, and behaviors of the mainstream national culture (e.g., Anglo culture orientation; Berry, 2005; Cuéllar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). From a person-environment fit perspective (Eccles et al., 1993; Hunt, 1975), an examination of perceived experiences with ethnic discrimination, while taking into account one's Anglo culture orientation, allows for the examination of dissonance or congruence between one's culture orientation and others' perceptions of oneself. In particular, individuals who perceive themselves to be highly involved in Anglo culture, and experience ethnic discrimination (which implies that one is viewed as a cultural outsider to Anglo culture) would experience a dissonance between their perceptions of themselves and how others perceive them. We propose that this dissonance could lead to decreases in their ethnic identity affirmation.

There is some support for these notions in prior work focused on indices of mental health and adolescents' externalizing behaviors. For example, results from a study that examined mental health outcomes among Latino adolescents (84% Mexican-origin) found that for boys, perceived ethnic discrimination was positively associated with depressive symptoms and negatively associated with self-esteem, but only for those who reported high involvement in Anglo culture (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Findings from another study indicated that Mexican American adolescents who spent their time with Mexican peers, but had fathers who were highly involved in Anglo culture (i.e., mismatch between youth and their fathers), reported high levels of peer delinquency (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Crouter, 2006). On the other hand, those who spent less time with Mexican peers and had fathers who were highly involved in Anglo culture (i.e., match between youth and their fathers) reported lower peer delinquency (Updegraff et al., 2006). Together, these studies suggest that a mismatch between characteristics of an individual (i.e., level of Anglo culture orientation) and his/her environment (e.g., perceived ethnic discrimination, fathers' cultural involvement) may have important implications for understanding individuals' outcomes.

Although no studies to our knowledge have examined whether the relation between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation is moderated by Anglo culture orientation among adolescents, similar work with college students that assessed ethnic identity commitment provides preliminary support. For example, one study found that, across four years of college, among those reporting high levels of national identity (conceptually similar to high Anglo culture orientation), higher perceived discrimination was associated with decreases in ethnic identity commitment (i.e., attachment, belonging, and clarity), whereas among those with a weaker national identity, higher perceived discrimination was associated with increases in ethnic identity commitment (Fuller-Rowell, Ong, & Phinney, 2013). The current study advances this prior work by examining

adolescents and focusing on the affective component of ethnic identity, ethnic identity *affirmation*.

Research Goals

This study examined whether perceived ethnic discrimination would interact with adolescents' Anglo culture orientation to inform future levels of ethnic identity affirmation, while controlling for previous levels of ethnic identity affirmation. In addition, because the process of acculturation is bidimensional (Berry, 2005; Cuéllar et al., 1995), we controlled for adolescents' Mexican culture orientation to examine the influence of Anglo culture orientation over and above the influence of Mexican culture orientation. Finally, because previous work has found changes in affirmation during adolescence (e.g., Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009), we controlled for adolescents' age.

Method

Sample

Participants included 205 Mexican-origin adolescent mothers. At Time 1, adolescents were 16.81 years old, on average ($SD = 1.00$). The majority of participants were in school (59.9%) and born in the United States (64.3%). The average household income, as reported by the adolescents' mothers figures, was \$27,314 ($SD = \$19,843$). Adolescents lived in households with an average of 4.84 individuals ($SD = 2.51$), ranging from living alone to households that included up to 16 individuals.

Procedure

Data for the current study came from an ongoing longitudinal study of Mexican-origin adolescent mothers (Umaña-Taylor, Guimond, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2013). Participants were recruited from schools and community agencies in a Southwestern metropolitan area. Inclusion criteria specified that adolescents had to be of Mexican-origin, 15 to 18 years old, currently pregnant, not legally married, and have a mother figure (e.g., biological mother, grandmother) who was willing to participate. Adolescents participated in face-to-face, in-home interviews in which all questions were read aloud. The current study utilized data from the first two waves of data collection (Time 1, Time 2). Adolescents were interviewed in their first trimester of pregnancy (Time 1) and when their child was 10 months of age (Time 2). Across Times 1 and 2, interviews were in Spanish (37%) or English, based on participant preference. Adolescents received \$25 at Time 1 and \$30 at Time 2. All procedures were approved by the university's Human Subjects Review Board.

Measures

Perceived ethnic discrimination—Adolescents' responses to a revised version of the Perceived Discrimination Scale (PDS; Whitbeck, Hoyt, McMorris, Chen, & Stubben, 2001) were utilized to assess their perceived ethnic discrimination at Time 1. The original PDS was designed for use with American Indian adolescents; the adapted version revised items to be applicable to Latinos (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). The 10 items (e.g., "How often have others said something bad or insulting to you because you are Hispanic/Latina?")

were scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *Almost never* (1) to *Very often* (4). Higher scores indicated higher perceived ethnic discrimination. Cronbach's alpha was .80.

Anglo culture orientation—Adolescents' responses to the Anglo orientation subscale of the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans – II (ARSMA – II; Cuéllar et al., 1995) were utilized to assess Anglo culture orientation at Time 1. The 13-item Anglo orientation subscale (e.g., “I enjoy watching movies in English” and “I associate with Anglos”) was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Not at all* (1) to *Extremely often or almost always* (5). Higher scores indicated higher engagement in Anglo culture. Cronbach's alpha was .87.

Mexican culture orientation—Adolescents' responses to the Mexican orientation subscale of the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans – II (ARSMA – II; Cuéllar et al., 1995) were utilized to assess Mexican culture orientation at Time 1. The 17-item Mexican orientation subscale (e.g., “I associate with Mexicans and/or Mexican Americans” and “My family cooks Mexican foods”) was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Not at all* (1) to *Extremely often or almost always* (5). Higher scores indicated higher engagement in Mexican culture. Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Ethnic identity affirmation—Adolescents' responses to the affirmation subscale of the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004) were utilized to assess their positive feelings toward their ethnicity at Times 1 and 2. The 6-item affirmation subscale (e.g., “If I could choose, I would prefer to be of a different ethnicity”) was scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *Does not describe me at all* to (4) *Describes me very well*. Items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated higher ethnic identity affirmation. Cronbach's alphas were .86 at Time 1 and .77 at Time 2.

Plan of Analysis

Our hypothesized model, tested via path analysis in MPLUS v.6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010), examined the associations between perceived ethnic discrimination and Anglo culture orientation at Time 1 with ethnic identity affirmation at Time 2; also, the interaction between perceived ethnic discrimination and Anglo culture orientation predicting affirmation was included. Time 1 ethnic identity affirmation was modeled as a control to examine ethnic identity affirmation at Time 2 as predicted by perceived ethnic discrimination and Anglo culture orientation at Time 1, after taking into account prior (Time 1) levels of ethnic identity affirmation. In addition, we controlled for adolescents' Mexican culture orientation to examine the influence of Anglo culture orientation over and above the influence of Mexican culture orientation. Continuous measures were mean-centered prior to the creation of the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991). Simple slopes analysis was used to decompose the significant interaction term (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006), and the interaction was graphed and probed at one standard deviation above and below the mean for Anglo culture orientation. Final model fit was assessed using the chi-square statistic, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the comparative fit index (CFI) (Kline, 2010). Missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML; Arbuckle, 1996).

Results

Bivariate correlations indicated that perceived ethnic discrimination was negatively associated with ethnic identity affirmation at Times 1 and 2 (see Table 1), albeit these correlations were small based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines for effect sizes of correlation coefficients. Further, there was a small positive association between Anglo culture orientation and perceived ethnic discrimination. Finally, ethnic identity affirmation measured at Time 1 was moderately associated with ethnic identity affirmation at Time 2.

Next, we examined our hypothesized model (see Figure 1). Given that the proposed model was saturated (i.e., number of estimated parameters = number of data points), we constrained non-significant pathways from preliminary path analyses to be zero (i.e., pathway from Time 1 age predicting ethnic identity affirmation at Time 2). The resultant model had good fit: $\chi^2 (df = 1) = 0.32, p = .57$; RMSEA = .00 [90% C.I. = .00 – .15]; CFI = 1.00. Findings indicated a significant interaction between perceived ethnic discrimination and Anglo culture orientation in predicting ethnic identity affirmation ($b = -.20, p < .05$), controlling for Mexican culture orientation. Consistent with our hypotheses, simple slopes analysis revealed that higher levels of perceived ethnic discrimination were associated with decreases in ethnic identity affirmation for adolescents with *high* levels of Anglo culture orientation ($t = -2.09, p < .05$); however, among those with *low* levels of Anglo culture orientation, there was not a significant association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation ($t = 0.79, p = .43$; see Figure 2). Although the current model included Mexican culture orientation as a control, supplemental analyses were conducted to examine whether findings would change if adolescents' nativity was included as a control, and the findings remained the same (results available upon request).

Discussion

Adolescent mothers are at higher risk for negative outcomes, such as lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms, than adult mothers (Whitman et al., 2001). Given that ethnic identity affirmation has been associated with higher self-esteem (Romero & Roberts, 2003) and lower depressive symptoms (Iturbide et al., 2009) for Latino youth, the current study examined predictors of ethnic identity affirmation among Mexican-origin adolescent mothers. Prior work that has examined whether ethnic identity affirmation is affected by perceived experiences of ethnic discrimination among Latino youth has yielded mixed results. Our findings may provide some insight into these mixed findings. Indeed, we found that this association emerged only under certain conditions. Below, findings are discussed with a focus on the role of mismatches and person-environment fit, as well as their implications for intervention efforts.

Consistent with the person-environment fit perspective (Eccles et al., 1993; Hunt, 1975), we expected that individuals reporting *high* Anglo culture orientation who experienced high levels of perceived ethnic discrimination (i.e., environmental context) would demonstrate decreases in their ethnic identity affirmation over time. Our findings were consistent with this hypothesis, and support the notion that a mismatch may be detrimental to youths' positive feelings about their ethnic group. In contrast, among adolescents reporting *low*

Anglo culture orientation, we found that there was no significant association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation, consistent with some prior work (e.g., Pahl & Way, 2006). Although the rejection-identification model hypothesizes that individuals draw closer to their ethnic group when they experience discrimination (e.g., Branscombe et al, 1999), our findings were inconsistent with this notion. Instead, our findings suggest that when adolescents who are more involved in mainstream Anglo culture experience discrimination, their positive feelings toward their ethnicity decrease. As noted by Armenta and Hunt (2009), the developmental context may play an important role in how individuals react to experiences of perceived discrimination. While adults may draw closer to their ethnic group (consistent with the rejection-identification model), this may not be the case for adolescents who place a relatively greater value during this developmental period on social status and fitting in with their peers; thus, making adolescents' ethnic identity vulnerable when they perceive ethnic discrimination (Armenta & Hunt, 2009). To our knowledge, only one other study has examined culture orientation (i.e., national identity) as a moderator of the links between perceived discrimination and ethnic identity commitment (Fuller-Rowell et al., 2013); that study focused on a college student sample and findings were generally similar to those in the current study. Thus, future work with a broader developmental age span is warranted to examine how these associations may shift across developmental periods.

Overall, it appears that adolescents who may be most at-risk for decreases in their ethnic identity affirmation are those who experience messages from their environment that do not match their own perceptions of themselves. Given that adolescents in the current study did not experience decreases in their ethnic identity affirmation if they were not highly involved in Anglo culture (despite perceiving ethnic discrimination), it is important to consider that adolescents with a high Anglo culture orientation may show the greatest gains from programs designed to reduce the negative impact of ethnic discrimination. Furthermore, programs designed to educate youth about person-environment mismatches and ways to cope with negative messages that may make them feel like a cultural outsider, may be particularly beneficial for youth who are members of marginalized groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has important strengths and implications, but there are several limitations to acknowledge. No studies to our knowledge have examined the association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation among Mexican-origin adolescent mothers. An understanding of factors that may impede positive development among adolescent mothers is important because they are at increased risk for negative outcomes (Whitman et al, 2001). Despite this strength, because of our exclusive focus on females in the current study, it is unclear if similar findings would emerge for males. It will be important for future work to examine this, given that results from a study of Latino adolescents found that the negative association between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation existed only for males, and not for females (Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010). Similar to extending this work to males, it will be useful to understand whether the process identified in the current study applies to other potentially marginalized groups (e.g., Asian Americans, bicultural individuals).

With respect to measurement, although prior work has provided support for the construct validity and reliability of the ethnic identity affirmation subscale (e.g., Supple et al., 2006; Yoon, 2011), and the items demonstrate face validity with respect to capturing the affective component of ethnic identity, future work will benefit from exploring whether the use of negatively-worded items that are reverse scored (as is the case in the affirmation scale) capture positive feelings toward one's ethnicity (see Phinney & Ong, 2007). Specifically, it will be useful to understand whether disagreeing to items about feeling negatively about one's ethnicity is the same as affirming one's ethnicity, and the implications this has for conceptualization of this construct.

Finally, although it was beyond the scope of the current study, future studies should extend this work by examining a process model whereby experiences of perceived ethnic discrimination interact with Anglo culture orientation to inform ethnic identity affirmation and, in turn, youth adjustment (e.g., self-esteem, depressive symptoms). This would enable stronger claims regarding the detrimental impact that mismatches can pose for adjustment.

Despite its limitations, the current study begins to bridge some of the gaps in current literature by demonstrating that the relation between perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity affirmation may depend on youths' Anglo culture orientation. Overall, our findings suggest that perceived ethnic discrimination poses a significant risk for Mexican-origin adolescent mothers who are highly involved in Anglo culture. These results have important implications for interventions, as they underscore the importance of targeting strategies for coping with perceived ethnic discrimination, especially among those highly involved in Anglo culture.

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Figure 1.

Results from Path Analysis Predicting Time 2 Ethnic Identity Affirmation from Perceived Ethnic Discrimination and Anglo Culture Orientation at Time 1.

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown. Covariation among the predictor variables was modeled but is not shown here for brevity. Control variables are presented in dashed boxes. Solid lines represent significant pathways and dashed lines represent non-significant pathways. T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2. $*p < .05$. $***p < .001$.

Figure 2.
Anglo Culture Orientation as a Moderator of the Association between Perceived Ethnic Discrimination at Time 1 and Adolescents' Ethnic Identity Affirmation at Time 2.
Note. * denotes significant slope at $p < .05$.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. T1 Age	---					
2. T1 Mexican Culture Orientation	-.10	---				
3. T1 Anglo Culture Orientation	-.01	-.42***	---			
4. T1 Perceived Discrimination	.07	.02	.14*	---		
5. T1 EI Affirmation	.15*	-.18**	.04	-.22**	---	
6. T2 EI Affirmation	.07	-.11	.10	-.16*	.38***	---
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Mean	16.81	3.89	3.61	1.34	3.80	3.82
Standard Deviation	1.00	0.71	0.73	0.37	0.50	0.41

Note. T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2, EI = Ethnic identity. Means and standard deviations reported here were calculated prior to centering.

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.