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The Role of Intrapersonal and Ecodevelopmental Factors in the Lives of Latino Alternative High School Youth

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Abstract

Despite efforts aimed at achieving health equity, Latino youth continue to experience significant health and mental health disparities. The purpose of this investigation was to explore the role of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors, including family, peer, school, and community, in the lives of Latino alternative high school youth residing in the Southwest, United States. Five focus groups were implemented with a total of 19 participants. Study findings are indicative of an ecology characterized by multiple challenges that have a significant impact on the lives of Latino alternative high school youth. Findings from this study reinforce that there remains a great need to fully understand the scope and influence of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors among Latino alternative high school youth to inform the development of culturally-responsive social work preventive intervention programs.

Keywords

Latino/Hispanic; adolescents; ecodevelopmental; intrapersonal

Adolescence represents a developmental period characterized by, among other things, an increased risk for engaging in health risk behaviors (Brindis et al., 2002; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012; Johnston et al., 2012). Although all adolescents are at risk of engaging in health risk behaviors, Latino adolescents are at even greater risk (Bouris et al., 2012; Trejos-Castillo & Vazsonyi, 2009). For example, findings from the *Monitoring the Future Study* indicate that, when compared to their non-Latino white and African American counterparts, Latino 8th and 10th grade adolescents are more likely to report licit and illicit substance use (with the exception of amphetamines) (Johnston et al., 2012). Latino alternative high school youth may be at even greater risk of engaging in health risk

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behaviors (Cordova et al., 2011; Cordova et al., 2012; Marsiglia et al., 2002). For example, Latino alternative high school youth are more likely to report substance use, as compared to their counterparts (Blum et al., 2000; Myers et al., 2009). Intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental risk and protective factors have been shown to play an essential role in adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Smetana et al., 2006). Unfortunately, many Latino youth experience ecological environments that negatively impact their development (Eamon & Mulder, 2005; Marsiglia et al., 2002). Although research shows that intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental risk and protective factors impact Latino youth development, qualitative social work research with Latino alternative high school youth remains limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and explore the role of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental risk and protective factors, including family, peer, school, and community, in Latino youth attending an alternative high school.

Prevention scientists and social workers alike have demonstrated the essential role that intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental risk and protective factors have on Latino youth. For the purposes of this study, intrapersonal risk and protective factors refer to psychological, cognitive and emotional beliefs and processes. For example, an internal desire for positive change, motivation to overcome barriers and challenges, and to achieve meaningful bonds and connections with others can serve as a protective factors for Latino youth (Parra-Cardona et al., 2008, 2009). Equally important, research has shown how ecodevelopmental factors play an important role on the influence of problem behaviors and the development of youth. Indeed, studies have highlighted that many Latino youth reside in disadvantaged environments, including parental substance use and absence (Lu et al., 2001; Marsiglia et al., 2002), peer substance use (Chartier et al., 2010), educational institutions lacking cultural responsiveness (Lu et al., 2001; Springer et al., 2005), experiences of discrimination (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Cervantes et al., 2011; Cordova & Cervantes, 2010), and high accessibility to alcohol and drugs (Guerrero, 2011), all of which pose great challenges to their development (Williams & Collins, 2001). Given that ecodevelopmental factors influence problem behaviors, it should not be surprising then that Latino adolescents disproportionately engage in health risk behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012; Johnston et al., 2012) that perpetuate health disparities (Jenson & Fraser, 2006; Marsiglia et al., 2009). Latino alternative high school youth may be at even greater risk of engaging in problem behaviors (Cordova et al., 2011; Pantin et al., 2009; Prado et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to examine both intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors concurrently to work toward a fuller understanding of how both may have an impact on this overlooked and vulnerable population.

Ecological theories provide a framework to work toward fully understanding the impact of systemic risk and protective processes on adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Franke et al., 2000). An ecological theory that has gained attention recently, especially in research with Latino populations, is the ecodevelopmental framework (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). Building on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1986), ecodevelopmental theory postulates that adolescent development occurs in multiple integrated ecological systems that both influence and are influenced by the adolescent over time (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). These systems include micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. Although some scholars have referred to community as a macrosystem (e.g., McNutt, Queiro-Tajalli,

Boland & Campbell, 2001), we conceptualize community as a microsystem in which the adolescent has direct contact, whereas macrosystems are broader cultural norms and laws (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). Because the current study is concerned with the microsystem, we limit the discussion in this section to that system. The microsystem refers to the various systems that the adolescent has direct contact with, including family, peer, school, and communities. The family microsystem, for example, may include family bonding which can serve as a protective factor. Peer substance use may be a risk factor in the adolescent's peer microsystem. The school microsystem may include supportive teachers, which can also serve as a protective factor. Finally, the community microsystem may include perceived discrimination, a risk factor for adolescents (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). Despite the profound impact that both intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors may have on Latino alternative high school adolescents, there remains relatively little scholarship (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Cordova et al., 2011; Prado et al., in press). Consequently, few Latino-specific preventive interventions exist for this population (Szapocznik et al., 2007). Scholarship aimed at developing a fuller understanding of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors operating in the lives of Latino youth may have great utility to inform culturally-responsive social work best practice approaches (Hohman & Gait, 2001; Sanchez, Dillon, Ruffin & De La Rosa, 2012) and work toward health equity in this population (Marsiglia et al., 2002). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors, including family, peer, school, and community in the lives of Latino alternative high school adolescents and to explore the role of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors in youth attending an alternative high school.

Methods

Design

To implement this study, a collaborative partnership was established with the school district as well as key community organizations that provide social services to youth attending the targeted school. All recruitment and data collection activities started after obtaining full approval from the Institutional Review Board.

Sampling

A purposive sample was recruited via multiple methods that have been successfully utilized in past research with Latino populations (Parra-Cardona et al., 2008; Parra-Cardona et al., 2009; Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). For example, fliers were given to community partners for distribution among potential participants. Additionally, we handed out fliers through face-to-face contact, a method critical for gaining access to Latino youth (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). The most effective method of recruitment for this study, however, was word-of-mouth and snowball sampling.

The study population consisted of Latino alternative high school adolescents residing in the Southwest, United States. Alternative high schools are educational institutions that implement curricula and methods that are non-traditional in order to accommodate students who manifest behavioral problems. The school from which participants were recruited for

this study is comprised of more than 82% Latino, 7.6% non-Latino white, 5.5% African American, and 1.3% Filipino. American Indian or Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Asian each represented 1.3%, 1%, and 0.3% of the school student population, respectively. Approximately, 51% of the students were English learners and 57% were considered socioeconomically disadvantaged.

To be considered for the study, participants had to: (a) identify as Latino/Hispanic, (b) attend the targeted school, and (c) have a signed consent form from their parents and a signed assent form indicating their willingness to participate in the study. A total of 19 Latino youth participated in this study, including 10 females and 9 males. The adolescents ranged in age from 15 to 19 years old (mean=17.00, SD=1.33). Eighty-nine percent of participants reported Mexico as their country of origin and 80% reported being U.S. born. Seventy-nine percent of the participants reported receiving free or reduced lunch.

Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized a focus group design for data collection. In addition to generating a type of data that cannot be generated through individual interviews, focus groups allow for participants to experience a sense of cohesion as they describe similar life experiences and systems challenges (Stewart et al., 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004).

Participants who returned signed consent and assent forms were pulled from classrooms to participate in the focus group interviews located in a private reserved classroom on campus. Five focus groups were conducted ranging from two to five participants each. Thus, one focus group consisted of two participants, three focus groups consisted of four participants each, and one focus group consisted of 5 participants, respectively. All focus groups were audio taped, followed a semi-structured format, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The focus group interview guide consisted of three open-ended grand tour questions, (a) please describe your life as a Latino youth who attends an alternative high school, (b) please describe environmental (family, peer, school, community) challenges as a Latino youth who attends an alternative high school, and (c) please describe environmental (family, peer, school, community) resources as a Latino youth who attends an alternative high school. Additional terms, including barriers and risk factors, were used to explore challenges during the focus group interviews. Conversely, terms such as support systems, strengths and protective factors were used to explore resources. This broad approach was taken to minimize questioning bias and aimed to privilege youths' voices: Participants were given an honorarium in the form of a \$10 gift card for their participation.

Data Analysis

In line with the grounded theory approach, preliminary analyses were conducted to identify emerging themes. In so doing, the focus group interview guide was modified after each focus group and preliminary analysis to include probes for intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors that youth identified as most relevant. For example, some youth identified teachers as an ecodevelopmental protective factor in their school microsystem. Therefore, the question, "Some participants identified teachers as a system of support here at school. Have you had a similar experience? If so, please tell me more about that."

Additionally, some youth identified experiences of discrimination as an ecodevelopmental risk factor. Therefore, a question on discrimination was then added as a probe to the main grand tour question of, "Please describe environmental challenges as a Latino youth who attends an alternative high school."

At the completion of all five focus group interviews, the recorded audiotapes were transcribed verbatim including the few words expressed in Spanish by participants (e.g., *tia*, *cholo*). The first, fourth, and last authors are all fully bilingual. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy once transcription was completed. Data were analyzed using the grounded theory approach which consists of a triadic process of analysis (i.e., open, axial, and selective coding; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data analysis led to the identification of four themes that provide a comprehensive explanation of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors described by participants. NVivo software version 8 was utilized for the organization, analysis, and coding of the data (QSR International, 2008).

The first step in the data analysis refers to open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process began with *in vivo* coding in which data were often coded using the words expressed by participants. The next step in the analysis involved axial coding. Axial coding refers to creating categories of the open codes, followed by the identification of relationships among categories based on their properties and dimensions (LaRossa, 2005). The final step of analysis refers to the process of integrating a theoretical schema of the phenomenon under study, a process known as selective coding. Selective coding aimed to integrate the main storyline that most accurately described the participants' ecology (Fassinger 2005; LaRossa, 2005). Trustworthiness of data was established following the guidelines of Morrow (2005), which consisted of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Results

Present findings provide in-depth descriptions of the role of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors identified by Latino alternative high school adolescent. Aimed at privileging the voices of youth, these four factors emerged from the three open-ended grand tour questions, (a) please describe your life as a Latino youth who attends an alternative high school, (b) please describe environmental (family, peer, school, community) challenges as a Latino youth who attends an alternative high school, and (c) please describe environmental (family, peer, school, community) resources as a Latino youth who attends an alternative high school.

The four factors include: (a) Intrapersonal factors, (b) ecodevelopmental family factors, (c) ecodevelopmental school factors, and (d) ecodevelopmental community factors.

Intrapersonal Factors

"To Prove Them Wrong": Strength and Resilience. Despite the numerous obstacles participants have experienced in their lives, most have found a source of motivation to overcome such barriers. For example, Lizette described how her reactivity toward stereotypes about Latinas has become a source of strength in her life:

I think what motivates me is once again, people who look at us Latinas as different. And I don't mean just not Caucasians, not just African Americans, I mean everybody. Having a single mom, two kids, people look at you different. And I think that's one of the main reasons I actually got a job and I started doing good in school. People are starting to look at me like, "Oh well, she's going to end up pregnant by age 16," or something like that. So to me, it's to prove them wrong.

For Chad, thinking about the future of his family serves as a powerful motivator because he does not want them to experience the challenges he is currently facing in his life: What keeps me is I'm just trying to get out of there [the neighborhood], you know? I'm just trying to move up so when I have my family they don't have to be in that shit too. Trying to do better things, that's what motivates me

Ecodevelopmental Family Factors

"It Hurts Not Having a Father There": Experiences of an Absent Father. Participants described in great detail the challenges associated with not having a father emotionally and/or physically present. Participants also expressed how painful these experiences are as they consider fathers to be extremely important in the lives of children and youth. For example, Petra expressed:

It really affects me [not having an emotionally present father] 'cause I really want a dad in my life. My dad is there but he doesn't notice the things that he's doing wrong. He's doing a lot of things wrong, but he doesn't really think that they're wrong. I love my dad but he's not always really there for me. I can't count on my dad for much...it sucks not having a father...it really hurts, not having a father there.

Alex described his experience growing up with a father addicted to heroin:

My father, he's been around since I've grown up but he's been a heroin addict for 25 years and methadone for 10. Most of the time, he was just knocked out in the room. I never hung out with him or anything. He was never there. He was incarcerated too.

When asked what father absence was like for him, Alex further elaborated, "Growing up, well it hurts me because just seeing my father go down like that. Especially because I know he's a very strong person." Monica's experience resembled that of Alex:

I didn't really have a dad. It was my uncle. I would always go up to him and tell him my problems. He never had a daughter. He had three boys and me, so he said I was his daughter. He passed away. He left me like a month ago...he passed away. I never had a dad. I don't know my real dad.

When asked if she could explain how her father had passed away, Monica shared:

He would do drugs all the time. He died because of heroin. He would inject himself a lot and he got infected. And he couldn't do it on his arm no more because he had no more vein. So he started doing it over here in his arm. So it got infected. His blood got infected, he got gangrene, and he had to take it off. It was...it was sad.

The doctor said for that to happen, all that arm to happen, probably would have taken a while. Everyone knew about his lifestyle, but he didn't want no one to know more, until he died.

"I Don't Put Anybody in Front of my Family": Familismo as a Protective Factor: Family also constitutes a source of motivation to overcome challenges for participants. Mario expressed how thinking about his family motivates him to fight adversity:

For me, like just to keep going is my little brother. He's like 9 years old and he goes to school and when my dad's not there [deported], he just feels bad, you know? My mom, she starts crying and everything and I feel bad. So that's my motivation. It's all for them.

Maritsa also described how her family serves as a source of nurturance, resilience and a strong motivational force to overcome challenges in her life:

Being able to bond with your family, being there for one another, and supporting each other - that's the main thing for me. That's all you got, your family. You should never put anybody before your family...my family means a lot to me. I don't put anybody in front of my family. Cause that's all you got. No matter what, they're always going to be there.

Lizette shared the ways in which her mother supports her and motivates her to do well:

The main person who actually made me stronger is my mom. Cause she doesn't want me to end up like her...single, struggling with money and everything. She's mostly the one person that has helped me to do good in my life...I saw how much my mom was struggling, and she would always tell me, 'I don't want you to end up like me.' And that's why I'm doing good...My mom is mostly the main reason.

Ecodevelopmental School Factors

"Some Teachers Here Are Like Your Tías": Personalismo and Respeto in the Classroom. Participants expressed the importance of the student-teacher relationship (17/19). In particular, youth described how relevant it is for them to be able to establish close, respectful, and supportive relationships with their teachers because these relationships constitute a source of strength for them. As participants described the nature of these relationships, they elaborated on the importance of nurturance and respect. For instance, Junior described how he feels cared for by his teachers at school. He highlighted the importance for teachers to communicate an accurate understanding of the life challenges he has experienced. Junior expressed:

In other schools, they're more strict. They're just about, "I'm getting paid to teach you this, so learn it." And over here [current school], they're more straight up. It looks like they care more. They'll talk to you and like, "Oh what's going on?" They take the time. It seems like they really care about you more...Because they know what most of the students here have been through and why we ended up here and stuff like that.

Lisa's experiences with her teachers are similar to Junior's. She affirmed, "Here, they care more, they want you to graduate. Teachers cry when you graduate here." She further elaborated:

And the teachers, they're cool. They get along with you, they respect you. They know you're here for a reason because you were a trouble maker and they try and make you more mature and to graduate high school. They actually care.

Armando confirmed Junior's and Lisa's perspectives about the importance of the student-teacher relationship. For him, being challenged by his teachers is actually a nurturing experience because he perceives how his teachers believe in him and actually remind him of his family. Armando expressed, "Some teachers here are like your tías [aunts]. I see some teachers like my grandma. Always like, "Armando do this. Armando come on." They're always pushing you." Ted shared Armando's perception about the student-teacher relationship. He affirmed:

This school, their main concentration is how are they going to help that kid who walked through that door to graduate. Other schools are like, "How are we going to get that kid to sit in that seat so the district can have their money?" They care about it here too, but when we're here, they care. That's why I think this school is the main important thing to me. I think it's one of the safest places.

Ted further described:

For the first time, [name of two teachers], they were the only two teachers that ever told me that I'm going to college. Not one single teacher in my life told me that. To tell you the truth, I barely started trying in school. They were the first two teachers to tell me that.

Maritsa expressed her experience of teachers sitting down and using humor over the difficulty of the subject as a form of encouragement, as she described:

Teachers sit with you and they'll laugh at it with you. And I think that's part of how you learn. Not just by writing on the board and, "Just do it!" They'll make things interesting, not boring for you. They'll actually try and make jokes out of it or something. They'll try and make you get into it.

Ecodevelopmental Community Factors

"They Just Spit in our Face": Perceptions of Discrimination. Participants identified perceived discrimination as an intense challenge to their lives and communities. Youth reported that many of these experiences had come from authority figures in the community that they had originally trusted. For example, Ted expressed, "We get pulled over all the time by cops. I think they just pull us over because they think we are in a gang or something." He went on to explain a recent incident:

I think they pulled us over because my friend Jesus, he kind of looks like a cholo [gang member] but he doesn't. It's just the goatee that makes him look like it...And I was in a wife beater [white tank top undershirt] and right when I got out of the car they said, "What do your tattoos mean?" Just because I have tattoos on my arm. I

bet you anything if they saw an old couple or something, they wouldn't pull them over. But it was two teenagers in a car looking like gang bangers with tattoos when they didn't even know us. It's alright though, it happens all the time...you get used to it after a while.

Mario also shared a similar experience, saying "They [police officers] judge you by the way you look or what you have on. You're bald and you're walking down the street and they just pull you over just to mess with you. That happens a lot." Mario further went on to express, "I'm just mad you know, cause there's people that cross the border and work hard to have a family and to do what's right, and they [Euro-Americans] just spit in our face...that's what I feel."

Sandra expressed her experiences as an ethnic minority woman, particularly when she leaves her neighborhood:

Being a Latina can have its advantages but it also puts us down sometimes. We're Latinas, and when we're around here [her community] we feel really comfortable. But if we go over to [another community] or something, where only White people live, they'll look at us different because we're Latinas.

Monica also reflected on her experiences of perceived discrimination in relation to being identified as a Latina:

They [Euro-Americans] don't really expect anything from us because they don't think we're that smart or anything. Cause we're Latinas and everything, they don't think we could do much in our lives. They don't think we could go to college and have a good career and stuff. There's not that many Latinas that have a good career.

"I Think We're Trapped": Experiences Associated with Drugs in the Community. Issues related to licit and illicit drugs were salient across all 19 participants of the focus groups. Specifically, all participants expressed how common drug use or abuse was among youth. Participants also reported knowing a close family member or friend who has been affected by drugs. As a result, participants expressed feelings of "being trapped." For example, Mario described his experiences of needing to sell drugs in order to support his family. Such a need was the result of his father being deported to Mexico because of his undocumented status. Mario and his family have lived through the deportation of his father three times. He expressed:

When my dad's gone [deported], for me personally, I've had to sell drugs to get my family through. The rent here is like \$1,900 bucks for like a two room apartment. And that's just a lot. My mom makes like \$300 every two weeks. She can't do that by herself. I can say I've slanged [sold drugs] a couple of times, only when I need to though.

Chad described the easy access to drugs in his community. He also described how widespread drug use is, particularly methamphetamine. He affirmed:

When I walk outside, I see someone smokin' a blunt [marijuana rolled up in cigar paper]. I smoke weed, I ain't gonna lie, but it's that other shit [methamphetamine] I don't fuck with. It's easy to find someone outside, just walking outside you'll see

someone smokin' [marijuana]. It's easy to find it. Drugs, they just come like that [he snaps his fingers].

Alex described how he feels trapped because of the drugs in the community:

It's like we're trapped. But, trapped is like you don't see anything other than what is being shown to you [drugs]. And some people just die off that, you know. They die off like not knowing what's going on. They die over drugs and stuff...and it just spread around just like a virus. And that's what trapped is.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the role of intrapersonal and ecodevelopmental factors in the lives of Latino alternative high school adolescents. Results from this study provide relevant data regarding the ecodevelopmental challenges commonly faced by participants. Findings also describe individual, familial, and community resources that youth identified as sources of protective factors to overcome adversity in their lives.

Ecodevelopmental Risk Factors

The ecodevelopmental (Szapocznik & Coastworth, 1999) framework provides a foundation for identifying salient risk factors at multiple levels that negatively impact the lives of participants. Risk factors can be identified in the various systems of the participants' ecology, such as family of origin, educational institutions, and the larger community. Participants reported key challenges associated with experiences of discrimination in their interaction with authority figures, such as police officers and teachers. These findings confirm previous research indicating that many Latinos experience perceived discrimination in diverse social settings (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Cordova & Cervantes, 2010). These experiences can lead to the development of both mental health (Cervantes et al., 2012; Garcia & Lindgren, 2009) and physical health problems (Flores et al., 2008). Perceived discrimination is also associated with distrust toward health and mental health care providers (Burgess et al., 2008), and reluctance to participate in preventive intervention programs (Castro et al., 2006).

Youth also described a sense of despair related to the pervasive abuse of illicit drugs in their family, peer, school, and community systems. They expressed how difficult it is to reject the peer pressure "pushing" them to consume drugs. These findings confirm previous research indicating that many Latino youth residing in inner-city urban areas are exposed to intense peer pressure associated with drug use and abuse (Prado et al., 2009).

Ecodevelopmental Protective Factors

Participants identified key protective factors embedded within multiple systems that have become sources of motivation and strength to overcome adversity. At the intrapersonal level, participants described their conviction to pursue important life goals based on a desire to challenge stereotypes about Latino youth. Specifically, the theme "To Prove Them Wrong" describes the ways in which participants want to challenge cultural stereotypes

about Latinos. These findings demonstrate the need for social workers to identify personal coping mechanisms that youth have developed to overcome adversity.

At the family level, participants expressed the ways in which family was a key factor to help them overcome oppressive systems challenges. For example, participants indicated the importance of family cohesion, support, and placing their family's needs before their own. These findings highlight the ways in which many Latino families in the U.S. emphasize the importance of Latino cultural values such as familismo and colectivismo (Falicov, 1998), and that the family system is one of the most important and influential system during adolescent development (Prado et al., 2012; Szapocznik, Hervis, & Schwartz, 2003).

Finally, participants confirmed the very important role that adult role models and mentors have in their lives. Specifically, participants provided detailed descriptions of how emotionally meaningful the student-teacher relationship is to them as this bond encourages them to remain in school, validates their self-worth, and motivates them to pursue important life goals. These findings confirm the critical and positive influence that mentors can have in the lives of Latino youth (Germán et al., 2009; Perez et al., 2009).

Social Work Practice Implications

Present findings provide relevant data to inform social work practice with Latino youth and their families. First, participants identified several ecodevelopmental factors that constitute significant barriers to their development, such as father absence, experiences of discrimination, and exposure to drug abuse in multiple systems. Thus, it is imperative for social workers to explore the extent to which the ecodevelopmental challenges reported by participants in this study resemble factors in the lives of their clients. When addressing these issues, it is important for social workers to fully immerse themselves in the systems reported by their clients, rather than assuming a distanced position by minimizing or overlooking the great burden that these challenges can impose on Latino youth. A particularly damaging challenge refers to the intense fear of racial profiling by authority figures, which is a burden that some social workers may never experience in their own lives. Social workers need to take great care not to replicate such racial stereotyping in their own practice. Instead, conveying a genuine understanding of such experiences may greatly enhance the therapeutic process and service outcomes.

This study also confirms that addressing the negative effects of father absence may be critical for effective clinical practice with Latino youth who are facing this life challenge. However, it is of the utmost importance to avoid adopting a deficit-based therapeutic stance. Specifically, social workers may inadvertently adopt a therapeutic perspective informed by negative stereotypes associated with Latino families (e.g., Latino fathers tend to be addicted to drugs and absent), overlooking the ways in which ecodevelopmental factors may play a critical role in the development of maladaptive paternal behaviors. Thus, although fathers in these families need to be accountable for their behaviors, father absence should also be understood in the context of socio-cultural oppression. For example, some participants of this study expressed that because their fathers were deported, they felt forced to engage in illegal behaviors as a survival mechanism (i.e., having to sell drugs to help pay rent).

Maintaining awareness of socio-cultural oppression and its impact on adolescent development and problem behaviors can serve to avoid pathologizing Latino youth. It is critical for social workers to analyze the ways in which historical discrimination and exploitation have been associated with the development of these family dynamics. Research has confirmed that systems stressors and exploitation are major factors contributing to parental mental health problems in Latino families (Garcia & Lindgren, 2009; Perez & Fox, 2008). As a general guide, adopting a genuine desire to learn about the challenges that parents have experienced in their lives since childhood and adolescence should always inform clinical interventions aimed at promoting parental accountability in the face of paternal absence or neglect.

The current underutilization of mental health services by Latinos is associated with intense systems challenges, including historical discrimination, exploitation, structural exclusion and institutionalized racism (Blendon et al., 2008; Snowden, 2005). Participants indicated how teachers in traditional schools who were not culturally-responsive, decreased their motivation to perform well academically. These perceived challenges may extend to service systems as well. For example, if youth perceive a clinician's engagement approach as insincere, irrelevant, or lacking cultural responsiveness, they are very likely to refuse to engage in services. Social workers who are not willing to fully understand the daily challenges of Latino youth, are at risk of blaming these "non-compliant" adolescents for remaining reluctant to engage in individual or family therapy (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005).

Future Social Work Research

Present findings confirm the need to clearly identify ecodevelopmental factors in the lives of Latino youth. Based on the risk factors reported by Latino youth, researchers should adopt a strength-based perspective to identify and examine protective factors and mechanisms of strengths that can be promoted in strengths-based preventive interventions (Parsai et al., 2009). Additionally, there continues to be a great need for research aimed at fully understanding the discrimination experienced by Latino youth. The current literature is limited with respect to qualitative studies that would help to develop a better understanding of such experiences (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Cordova & Cervantes, 2010), despite the many deleterious physical and mental health consequences that result from encountering discrimination (Araújo & Borrell, 2006; Pérez et al., 2008). Such research is needed to better inform services to Latino youth facing discrimination. Finally, future research should aim to implement qualitative methods with different Latino populations to analyze their similar and contrasting ecodevelopmental factors. The findings of such investigations could better inform social work preventive interventions with Latino youth.

Limitations and Conclusion—Present findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the sample is not representative of all Latino alternative high school adolescents and thus findings are not generalizable to all Latino youth in the U.S. Second, although not a methodological limitation, this study is qualitative in nature. Therefore, causal inferences cannot be made.

In spite of these limitations, this study provides qualitative data delineating various strengths and challenges experienced by a group of Latino alternative high school youth. These findings can help social work researchers and clinicians understand the protective factors operating in the lives of Latino youth, while also illuminating the ways in which ecodevelopmental factors have played a critical role in the development of maladaptive behaviors within this population. This study also contributes to building a larger body of knowledge on risk and protective factors of diverse Latino populations, including alternative high school adolescents. The ultimate goal of this line of research should be to culturally inform clinical practice, as well as to develop culturally-responsive programs of community-based services research aimed at reducing the intense health disparities that continue to negatively impact the lives of Latino youth.

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