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## Exploring the Impact of a Positive Psychology and Creative Journal Arts Intervention with Latina/o Adolescents

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Exploring the Impact of a Positive Psychology and Creative Journal Arts Intervention with  
Latina/o Adolescents

Abstract

A creative journal arts and positive psychology intervention was utilized to explore resilience, personal recovery attitudes, and symptoms of depression in Latina/o adolescents. The impact of a seven-week group counseling experience conducted with adolescents was analyzed and revealed positive improvements for participants in all three areas. Benefits for Latina/o youth participating in this type of group are discussed and guidelines for school counselors and clinical mental health counselors are revealed.

*Keywords:* Creative journal arts, positive psychology, Latina/o adolescents

## Exploring the Impact of a Positive Psychology and Creative Journal Arts Intervention with Latina/o Adolescents

The Latina/o population is at greater risk than other populations for depressive symptoms, mental health impairment, suicide attempts, suicide ideation, and hopeless feelings (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Wagstaff & Polo, 2012). Although many youth need mental health services (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003), their mental health needs are often underserved by mental health professionals (Burke, Loeber, Lahey, & Rathouz, 2005) and school counselors. In addition to lack of mental health services in some secondary schools, there is evidence of a negative relationship between mental health and academic achievement (Whelley, Cash, & Bryson, 2003), which makes exploring the impact of interventions to help Latina/o adolescents improve mental health important. Therefore, this study augments previous research by examining treatment effectiveness of a 7-week positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention with Latina/o adolescents. Findings have potential to inform evidenced-based practices for school and clinical mental health counselors who work with underserved youth.

### **Importance of Complete Mental Health**

A dual-factor model of mental health with indicators of subjective well-being as well as psychopathology allows counselors to understand complete mental health (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Subjective well-being refers to life satisfaction as well as positive and negative affect (Diener, 2000) while psychopathology refers to clinical symptoms (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Additionally, psychopathology and subjective well-being should be examined as separate forms of mental health given that an examination of only psychopathology excludes essential areas of mental health such as resilience and personal recovery symptoms (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008).

Resilience is particularly poignant for Latina/o adolescents given the relationship with academic achievement, positive coping responses, and college self-efficacy. Cavazos et al. (2010) interviewed Latina/o college students to discover their resilient characteristics. The following factors played an important role in their resiliency: high educational goals, parental support, intrinsic motivation, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy. In another study with Latina women with children and farmworker backgrounds, Graff, McCain, and Gomez-Vilchis (2013) found that family networks, self-efficacy, and desire to instill educational values in children played important roles to academic achievement. In addition to elements of subjective well-being such as resilience, examining the efficacy of interventions that target psychopathology with Latina/o adolescents are paramount for understanding the impact on complete mental health.

### **Positive Psychology and Positive Psychology Interventions**

Positive psychology refers to techniques that lead students to focus on what is positive in their lives (Seligman, 2002). For the Latina/o population, already bathed in the negativity of the environment as well as their own mental health issues, we postulate that focusing on positive elements would be more beneficial to their clinical and personal recovery. Positive psychological interventions (PPIs) are empirically-validated approaches that can increase positive emotions and strengths (Lomas, Hefferson, & Ivztan, 2014; Zolfagharifard, 2017). Zolfagharifard (2017) postulated that some groups of PPIs include gratitude interventions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), forgiveness interventions (Toussaint & Webb, 2005), strengths-based interventions (Bryant, 2013), meaning-oriented interventions (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009), and creativity interventions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Interest regarding the impact of positive psychology interventions on positive mental health has increased. Evidence suggests that positive psychology interventions have potential to increase gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001), hopeful thinking (Odou & Vella-Brodick, 2013), and character strengths (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Rashid and Anjum (2008) explored the impact of group positive psychotherapy sessions on adolescents' perceptions of meaning, engagement, and pleasantness. Compared with a no-treatment control group, adolescents in the positive psychology group experience reported higher levels of engagement, meaning, and pleasantness. It is worth noting that significant differences on life satisfaction and depression were not found. In another study, Suldo, Savage, and Mercer (2014) evaluated the impact of a positive psychology group intervention on adolescents' life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, and internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Adolescents in the positive psychology group experience reported higher levels of satisfaction with life. However, differences in positive and negative affect as well as internalizing and externalizing symptoms were not found. Finally, Roth, Suldo, and Ferron (2017) evaluated the impact of a multicomponent positive psychology intervention on adolescents' subjective well-being and clinical symptoms. Similar to Suldo et al. (2014), they explored the impact of positive psychology on complete mental health such as subjective well-being and clinical psychopathology. Adolescents who participated in the multicomponent positive psychology intervention reported higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect as well as lower levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

### **Creative Journal Arts Therapy**

In addition to positive psychology, creative journal arts therapy has potential to influence Latina/o adolescents' complete mental health. Creative arts therapists postulate that adolescents

can use creativity to elicit emotional expression through different means of communication (Puig et al., 2006). Whereas traditional counselors encourage adolescents to talk about feelings, other counselors use creative interventions to encourage adolescents to explore feelings in a safe manner through alternative methods (Binkley, 2013). Creative arts interventions might facilitate emotional expression, improve psychological well-being (Puig et al., 2006), and improve self-expression (Boldt & Paul, 2011). Researchers who explored the role of Creative Arts Therapy (CAT) in a clinical setting found that art facilitated self-understanding and personal growth (Puig et al., 2006). Also, researchers compared breast cancer patients in a CAT intervention with participants in a control group and found statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between treatment and control group members across tension-anxiety, depression-dejection, anger-hostility, and confusion-bewilderment. In addition to quantitative findings, clinical significant findings were found regarding participants' psychological well-being, expression of feelings, and increased self-awareness (Puig et al., 2006). Finally, Vela, Ikonopoulou, Dell'Aquila, and Vela (2016) explored the effectiveness of a nine-session creative journal therapy program for female survivors of intimate partner violence. Sample creative journal arts activities included drawing with non-dominant hand, water painting, creating balloons, drawing, and clay sculpting. Using a single-case research design, they identified that creative journal arts therapy might help improve hope and self-esteem among survivors of intimate partner violence.

### **Purpose of Study and Rationale**

Researchers highlighted benefits of positive psychology and creative journal arts, yet little is known about the impact of integrating these approaches with Latina/o adolescents. This presents a concern given that Latina/o adolescents might be at greater risks to develop depression and other mental health issues (Center for Disease Control, 2015) as well as the relationship

between mental health and academic achievement. As a result, the purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of a positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention on Latina/o adolescents' resilience, personal recovery, and depressive symptoms. We explored the following research question: What is the impact of positive psychology and creative journal arts on adolescents' resilience, personal recovery, and depressive symptoms when compared to a control group?

### **Method**

We used a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design to examine the influence of a positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy group counseling experience on attitudes toward resilience, life satisfaction, and personal recovery (Balkin & Kleist, 2017). A pretest was given to adolescents in the treatment and control groups at the beginning of the study. Following this, one group of adolescents received 7-sessions of positive psychology and creative journal arts and another group of adolescents received no intervention. At the conclusion of the intervention, we administered a posttest to measure the impact of the intervention to examine differences in outcome variables between adolescents in the treatment and control groups (Balkin & Kleist, 2017).

### **Participant Characteristics**

Participants in this study were 67 Latina/o adolescents in two high schools in the southern United States. Participants had a mean age of 15.27 ( $SD = .93$ ) and identified as Latina/o, Mexican American, or Hispanic. School counselors helped identify and recruit adolescents who presented mental health and academic needs. School counselors also distributed consent forms to and parents for potential participation. A letter describing the positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention was sent to families of potential students identified in initial

screening and recruitment. Participants were predominantly in ninth and tenth grade with 24 males and 43 females. The following was the breakdown of their generation status: first generation (4.5%), second generation (36%), third generation (24%), fourth generation (25%), and fifth generation (1.5%).

### **Measurements**

We utilized three scales with evidence of reliability and validity to measure resilience, depressive symptoms, and recovery. Instruments selected for pretests and posttests included Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008), Recovery Assessment scale (RAS; Giffort et al., 1995), and Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression-Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). These scales were selected to provide information regarding adolescents' ability to bounce back after adversity, depressive symptoms, and recovery symptoms.

**Resilience.** The Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008) measures participants' ability to bounce back and recover from stress. Sample items include, "I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times" and "I usually come through difficult times with little trouble." Bluth and Eisenlohr-Moul (2017) found internal consistency coefficients ranging from .78 to .91 with adolescents.

**Recovery.** The Recovery Assessment Scale (RAS; Giffort et al., 1995) is a self-report inventory to measure participants' recovery related to personal confidence, willingness to seek help, goal orientation, and tolerable level of symptoms. Sample items include, "I know when to ask for help" and "I am willing to ask for help." Gonzales, Hernandez, Douglas, and Yu (2016) explored factor structure with youth who engaged in substance abuse. They found internal consistency of .90 as well as strong convergent and discriminant validity.

**Depressive symptoms.** The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) measures adolescents' depressive symptoms. Participants responded to a 3-point scale ranging from most of the time (3) to never or rarely (0). Sample items include, "I felt sad" and "I felt lonely." Reliability coefficients in studies with adolescents have been acceptable (.74; Gresham, Melvin, & Gullone, 2016).

### **Procedure**

Before implementing the study, we obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a university in the southern United States. The third author, who was enrolled in a graduate counseling program at the time of this study, conducted the positive psychology and creative journal arts group in partnership with high schools in south Texas. Five participant groups comprised the treatment group at two high schools. Adolescents who provided assent and whose parents provided consent had options to participate in five groups over the course of two academic semesters. The matched comparison group was comprised of students from both high schools who did not participate in the positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention. The comparison group followed treatment as usual which did not include counseling experiences. The treatment group followed a 7-session protocol meeting for approximately 50 minutes each week after school. Pre-test measures were administered before the start of session one while post-test measures were administered at the conclusion of session seven. The same procedures were followed for the non-treatment comparison group.

### **Treatment**

Participants in the treatment group received seven sessions of positive psychology and creative journal arts (Cappichione, 1991; Savage, 2011; Seligman, 2002; Suldo & Michalowski, 2007). Recovery-oriented counseling, which is the involvement of mental health consumers

(Davidson, 2014), also influenced treatment. This approach operates from a model in which research, treatment, and evaluation are led by peers with “expertise and experience” (Davidson, 2014). Pickett and others (2010) defined peer-led as “interventions delivered by individuals who self-identify as having a mental illness and share that knowledge publicly” (p. 97). The rationale for including peer-led interventions is that people who overcame mental health issues can provide hope to people who face similar situations (Davidson, Chinman, Sells, & Rowe, 2006). Peer instructors also have potential to serve as real-life examples of recovery, thereby offering participants in recovery with encouragement (Pickett et al., 2010). In the current study, the group facilitator shared personal struggles and resilient stories with mental health recovery.

Based on the third author’s personal recovery experiences and knowledge of positive psychology interventions, she selected and adapted positive psychology and creative journal arts techniques into a 7-session treatment program to help adolescents express emotions, identify gratitude, and develop hope toward the future. For sessions one and two, she selected, adapted, and implemented techniques and a video to demonstrate the importance of positive psychology and happiness. For sessions three and four, she selected techniques and videos that focused on helping adolescents express gratitude, create a mandala, and explore love languages through creative arts. Sessions five and six focused on helping adolescents explore their inner and outer personalities, creating a mask using creative arts, and exploring personal strengths and talents. Session seven focused on using art to express gratitude toward significant people in their lives as well as identify hope toward the future. Consistent with a personal-recovery approach, she shared experiences with personal recovery and depression.

### **Statistical Power Analysis**

Upon starting this study, we identified the number of participants needed to establish power for our research design at the .80 level based on  $\alpha = .05$  by conducting an *a priori* power analysis using *G\*Power 3* program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). A sample size of 34 was necessary to identify a moderate effect for dependent variables. Given our sample of 67 participants, we regard our results as dependable to predict the influence of a positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention or control group on decreasing depressive symptoms, increasing resiliency, and increasing personal recovery (Lancaster, Lenz, & Meadow, 2013).

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Pretest and posttest values for depressive symptoms, resilience, and personal recovery were analyzed using t-test and Split Plot Analysis of Variance (SPANOVA). Before receiving either a 7-week positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention or treatment as usual, both groups exhibited similar levels of depressive symptoms ( $M = 24.04$ ,  $SD = 10.71$ ; and  $M = 18.9$ ;  $SD = 13.19$ ;  $t(1, 65) = 1.67$ ,  $p = .10$ ). The homogeneity of variance assumption was met; an alpha level of .05 was used for the current analysis. The SPANOVA resulted in a statistically significant interaction between treatment group and time for participants' ability to reduce depressive symptoms while participating in the treatment group,  $F(1, 65) = 4.86$ ,  $p < .05$ , effect size = .07. No main effects were noted for either time  $F(1, 65) = 3.45$ ,  $p = .07$ , effect size = .05, or group  $F(1, 65) = 4.86$ ,  $p = .76$ , effect size = .001. These findings indicate that participants in the positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention group obtained statistically significant lower scores on depressive symptoms from pretest to posttest when compared to adolescents in the control group from pretest to posttest.

Before receiving either a 7-week positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention or treatment as usual, both groups exhibited similar levels of resiliency ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .54$ ; and  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = .51$ ;  $t(1, 65) = -1.92$ ,  $p = .06$ ). The homogeneity of variance assumption was met; an alpha level of .05 was used for the current analysis. The SPANOVA resulted in a statistically significant interaction between treatment group and time for participants' ability to reduce depressive symptoms while participating in the treatment group,  $F(1, 65) = 4.38$ ,  $p < .05$ , effect size = .06. A main effect was indicated for time  $F(1, 65) = 7.01$ ,  $p < .05$ , effect size = .10 but not for group,  $F(1, 65) = .006$ ,  $p = .94$ , effect size = .00. These findings indicate that adolescents in the positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention and adolescents in the control group obtained statistically significant higher scores on resilience from pretest to posttest. Results from the interaction effect indicate that adolescents in the positive psychology and creative journal arts group obtained statistically significant higher scores on resilience from pretest to posttest when compared with adolescents in the control group from pretest to posttest.

Before receiving either a 7-week positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention or treatment as usual, both groups did not exhibit similar attitudes toward personal recovery ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = .56$ ; and  $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = .60$ ;  $t(1, 65) = -3.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This finding indicates that the control group had statistically significant higher levels of personal recovery before the study. Given that there were statistically significant differences in pre-levels of recovery, we used Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to examine differences in recovery when controlling for pre-test differences. The  $F$ -test for effect of the positive psychology intervention group showed that there were statistically significant differences between treatment and control group on the posttest scores of personal recovery when controlling for pre-test differences,  $F(1,$

65) = 9.23,  $p < .001$ , effect size = .13. These findings indicate that participants in the positive psychology intervention group had significantly higher levels of post-test recovery attitudes than the control group while controlling for pre-recovery levels.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of a positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention on Latina/o adolescents' resilience, personal recovery, and depressive symptoms. Based on previous research (Roth et al., 2017) and personal experiences, we developed the following hypotheses: (1) adolescents in a positive psychology and creative journal arts group would report greater increases in resilience when compared to a control group, (2) adolescents in a positive psychology and creative journal arts group would report greater increases in personal recovery when compared to a control group, and (3) adolescents in a positive psychology and creative journal arts group would report greater reductions in depressive symptoms when compared to a control group. Support for hypothesis one was detected given that adolescents in the positive psychology and creative journal arts group obtained statistically significant higher scores on resilience from pretest to posttest. Because gratitude, hope, and happiness relate to adolescents' resilience, grit, or persistence, it would be reasonable to expect that helping Latina/o adolescents explore these concepts in a group setting could improve their beliefs to bounce back from adverse experiences. Previous correlational or predictive studies have identified relationships between some variables on Latina/o adolescents' persistence or hope, yet little is known about the impact of treatment effects of specific interventions. Results of the current study extend knowledge from previous studies by highlighting benefits of participation in a positive psychology and creative journal arts program with Latina/o adolescents.

Our second hypothesis suggested that participants in the positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy group would report an increase in personal recovery attitudes. Support for this hypothesis was found given that participants in the treatment group had significantly higher personal recovery attitudes than the control group when controlling for pre-treatment attitudes. Attitudes toward recovery refer to personal confidence, willingness to seek help, goal orientation, and tolerable level of symptoms (Giffort et al., 1995; Gonzalez et al., 2016). By helping Latina/o adolescents identify gratitude about their past, happiness about the present, and hope for the future, they might have developed an improved sense of confidence to take action when faced with mental health struggles. Finally, our third hypothesis suggested that participants in the positive psychology and creative journal arts group would report a decrease in depressive symptoms. Support for this hypothesis was found given that adolescents in the positive psychology and creative journal arts group obtained statistically significant lower scores on depressive symptoms from pretest to posttest when compared to adolescents in the control group from pretest to posttest. Given the negative relationship among gratitude, happiness, resilience, and depressive symptoms, interventions that attempt to improve these factors might have an impact on reducing reports of depression. Previous studies have highlighted correlational and predictive relationships, yet little is known about the impact of interventions that target these outcomes. Results of this study extend findings from previous studies by demonstrating the positive impact of a positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention.

### **Implications for Practice**

Given the growing Latina/o population and their mental health needs, we were interested in examining the impact of a positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy intervention on resilience, depressive symptoms, and personal recovery. Results of this study support the

implementation of strength-based and creative interventions and techniques with Latina/o adolescents. School counselors can use the intervention to create change within Latina/o adolescents. Consistent with a growing trend toward brief counseling approaches (Lancaster et al., 2013), we used a brief 7-week intervention that can be tailored to meet high school students' and counselors' busy academic schedules. Hope interventions or exercises can be developed and delivered in 90-minute individual or group counseling sessions (Feldman & Dreher, 2012). Delivering psychoeducational workshops on hope or creative journal arts with larger groups of students could also be an effective and efficient way to reach students. Additionally, school counselors can use the entire 7-week intervention or parts of the treatment approach to adapt to their students. School counselors also could lead psycho-educational and interactive workshops on creative journal arts therapy and positive psychology techniques. Finally, findings could be presented to graduate counseling students in courses on multicultural counseling, school counseling, and practicum. Future school counselors need to be aware of treatments and interventions that have shown efficacy when working with Latina/o adolescents.

An important component of recovery-oriented research is the involvement of mental health consumers (Davidson, 2014). This approach operates from a model in which research, treatment, and evaluation are led by peers with "expertise and experience" (Davidson, 2014). Peer instructors also have potential to serve as real-life examples of recovery, thereby offering participants in recovery with encouragement (Pickett et al., 2010). Based on results from this study, school counselors and clinical mental health counselors could consider sharing parts of their story when working with Latina/o adolescents. By providing Latina/o adolescents with stories of success and resilience, the result could be an improvement in resilience and depressive symptoms. Latina/o adolescents might have the attitude that, "If my school counselor has

overcome adverse experiences, then so can I.” Sharing personal and genuine stories of struggle and resilience also provides avenues to establish strong therapeutic relationships through authenticity and genuineness. Findings from the current study provide initial support that sharing personal stories of recovery can improve mental health outcomes for Latina/o adolescents.

### **Implications for Research**

Researchers should conduct larger between-groups designs that include random assignment and experimental control to provide further evidence of treatment efficacy. Exploring differences in treatment gains between creative journal arts and other approaches is also important. Because our sample consisted of all Latina/o adolescents in the southern United States, future studies should include adolescents from different ethnic groups and geographic regions. Researchers also can design and evaluate a 12-week positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention on Latina/o and other adolescents’ depressive symptoms, resilience, and recovery. A longer intervention might lead to greater differences in terms of effect size and practical significance. Additionally, researchers can explore the impact of positive psychology or creative journal arts interventions on other variables such as hope, college self-efficacy, academic achievement, and meaning in life. Also, in-depth qualitative interviews with participants will provide greater insight into why and how positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy helps reduce depressive symptoms and increase resiliency and personal recovery among Latina/o youth. Finally, given that we focused on high school students in the current study, exploring the impact of a similar intervention with middle school students is worthwhile.

### **Limitations**

Similar to other studies with similar sample sizes (Lancaster et al., 2013), our findings are not strong enough to generalize to other settings and populations. Additionally, all adolescents in the treatment group identified as Latina/o, limiting our results to similar populations. Exploring the impact of positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy on other populations is important. Finally, given that our study used a brief intervention, it is not clear if treatment gains on resilience, depressive symptoms, and personal recovery were sustained. Future investigations should explore the impact of longer interventions and collect follow-up data to evaluate progress after treatment.

### **Conclusion**

Using positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy to assist Latina/o adolescents in decreasing depressive symptoms and increasing resilience should be considered by counselors in clinical mental health and school settings. Based on results of this study, positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy shows promise as an effective method for improving resilience and reducing depressive symptoms among Latina/o adolescents. We recommend that researchers continue to examine the impact of positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy with different outcome variables and larger sample sizes. In the current study, we provide guidelines for school counselors and clinical mental health counselors to consider when implementing treatment approaches for Latina/o adolescents with resilience and depressive symptoms. We also recommend that secondary schools promote positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy to work with Latina/o adolescents. School counselors, clinical mental health counselors, and counselor educators are in a position to promote and use positive psychology and creative journal arts therapy, which have been shown to enhance Latina/o adolescents' mental health and resilience.

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