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Using a Positive Psychology and Family Framework to Understand Mexican American Adolescents' College-Going Beliefs

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Abstract

Positive psychology is a useful framework to understand Mexican American adolescents' academic experiences. We used a quantitative, predictive design to explore how presence of meaning in life, search for meaning in life, subjective happiness, hope, and family importance influenced 131 Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. We used the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Subjective Happiness Scale, Hope Scale, Pan-Hispanic Familism Scale, and College-Going Self-Efficacy Scale to measure the aforementioned factors. Using multiple regression analysis, findings indicated that hope and familism were significant predictors of college-going beliefs. Higher levels of hope and familism positively predicted college-going beliefs. We provide a discussion regarding the importance of these findings as well as recommendations for future research.

Keywords

positive psychology, college-going beliefs, Mexican American adolescents

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Researchers have utilized a strength-based approach to understand factors that contribute to Latina/o college students' positive psychological functioning (Ojeda, Castillo, Rosales Meza, & Pina-Watson, 2014; Ojeda, Edwards, Hardin, & Pina-Watson, 2014; Ojeda, Flores, & Navarro, 2011; Vela, Castro, Cavazos, Cavazos, & Gonzalez, 2015; Vela, Lu, Lenz, & Hinojosa, 2015) and academic resilience (e.g., Morales, 2008). Drawing on positive psychology (Seligman, 2002) as a conceptual framework, researchers tried to understand factors that contribute to positive psychological functioning and resilience among students and/or adults. Positive psychology focuses on those strategies that promote or increase happiness, positive emotions, and well-being (Seligman, 2002). Positive psychology also helps students explore (a) how to come to terms with the past, (b) how to develop positive emotions about the present, (c) how to cultivate strengths, and (d) how to develop hope about the future (Seligman, 2002). For positive psychology factors that we explore in this study, we included presence of meaning in life, search for meaning in life, hope, and subjective happiness. These factors have been associated with academic achievement, positive psychological functioning, and career development. The family factor that we included in our inquiry is *familism* (Marin & Marin, 1991), which has been associated with positive mental health and grit among Latina/o college students. As a result, we use positive psychology and familial factors as a conceptual framework to understand Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs.

Positive Psychology Factors

There is growing interest in the role of meaning in life on adolescent outcomes in mental health and academic achievement (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011; Steger & Shin, 2010). Meaning in life is viewed as a psychological strength (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) and fundamental principle of positive psychology (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Meaning in life refers to a process of self-discovery of meaning with two components: (a) search for meaning in life and (b) presence of meaning in life (Frankl, 1963; Steger & Shin, 2010). Search for meaning in life relates to one's motivation toward finding meaning in life, while presence of meaning in life refers to one's current subjective attribution of meaning in life. Meaning in life has been associated with goal-specific hope (Vela et al., 2014), psychological well-being (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2012), and subjective happiness (Vela, Castro, et al., 2015). In addition, there is evidence that subjective well-being (i.e., subjective happiness, happiness, or positive affect; Diener, 2000) predicts positive adolescent and young adult outcomes. Subjective happiness is related to fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Suldo & Huebner,

2006) as well as autonomy and self-directedness (Garcia & Moradi, 2012). Whereas its correlation with college-going beliefs warrants further attention, its relationship with academic motivation (Gabriele, 2008), positive family connection (Lambert et al., 2014), self-esteem, and self-directedness is well documented (Datu, 2013; Garcia & Moradi, 2012).

Another factor in positive psychology that might be linked to college-going beliefs is hope, which is composed of two components: (a) pathways and (b) agency (Snyder et al., 1991). Pathways thinking refers to an individual's *plans* to pursue desired objectives as well as *beliefs* in one's ability to pursue objectives (Feldman & Dreher, 2012). Agency thinking refers to "thoughts that people have regarding their ability to begin and continue movement on selected pathways toward those goals" (Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999, p. 180). Hope has been linked with academic performance (Snyder et al., 2002), goal attainment (Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wroblewski, 2009), mental health (Marques, Pais-Ribeiro, & Lopez, 2011), and meaning in life (Vela et al., 2014). Marques and others (2011) explored the relationship among positive psychology factors on adolescents' mental health and academic achievement. Hope predicted academic achievement and mental health over 2 and 3 years. In another investigation, Marques, Lopez, and Mitchell (2013) examined the relationships among hope, spirituality, and religious practice on adolescents' subjective happiness. Hope significantly predicted life satisfaction when assessed 6 and 12 months later, providing evidence of the relationship between hope and subjective well-being.

Family Importance

Family importance, or familism, is a subjective belief expressed in, and sustained by, family relationships that has been found to consistently affect Latina/o students' academic performance, mental health, and career development (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Edwards & Romero, 2008; Vela, Lenz, Sparrow, Gonzalez, & Hinojosa, 2015). Marin and Marin (1991) noted that familism refers to loyalty and solidarity to the family unit. Important aspects of familism include family connectedness, family identity, family mutual activities, and family cohesion (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). Researchers found that family importance might protect against drinking behaviors (Strunin et al., 2015), substance abuse (Telzer, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2014), and sexual-risk behaviors (Guilamo-Ramos, Bouris, Jaccard, Lesesne, & Ballan, 2009). We also speculate that familism might also influence Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs.

College-Going Beliefs

Bandura (1997) depicted self-efficacy as individuals' beliefs regarding their ability to accomplish tasks and goals. Researchers detected positive relationships between self-efficacy with emotional health (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998; Solberg & Viliarreal, 1997; Tong & Song, 2004) and academic achievement, as well as a negative association with anxiety (Wang & Liu, 2000). Although researchers explored college students' general and academic self-efficacy, less attention has been given to the self-efficacy levels in younger students. Gibbons and Borders (2010) created a measure to evaluate college-going beliefs as a predictor of attendance and persistence of adolescents. In contrast to general self-efficacy, college-going beliefs measure an adolescent's confidence in his or her ability to attend and persist in college (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Gonzalez, Stein, and Huq (2012) examined the influence of cultural identity and perceived barriers on Latino adolescents' college-going beliefs and educational aspirations. Public ethnic regard and individual resilience in response to barriers were positively related with college-going beliefs. In another investigation, Vela, Flamez, Sparrow, and Lerma (2016) examined Mexican American adolescents' perceptions of school counselor support as predictors of college-going self-efficacy. Expectations and accessibility to school counselors had a positive relationship with college-going beliefs while appraisal from school counselors had a negative relationship with college-going beliefs.

Purpose of Study

Researchers have explored Mexican American college students' academic achievement (e.g., Aguayo, Ojeda, Herman, & Flores, 2011; Ojeda, Castillo, et al., 2014) and positive psychological functioning (Vela, Castro, et al., 2015). However, there is less research with Mexican American adolescents, particularly because of parental consent/student assent issues (Balkin, Flamez, & Smith, 2015). To the best of our knowledge, no study to date has used a positive psychology and family framework to understand Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. As such, the purpose of this study is to explore whether positive psychology and family factors relate to Mexican American adolescents' sense of college-going beliefs. We explored the following research question:

Research Question 1: To what extent does presence of meaning in life, search for meaning in life, hope, subjective happiness, and familism influence Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs?

Method

Participant Characteristics

One hundred thirty-one students enrolled at a high school in South Texas provided data for this study. All participants were enrolled in ninth-grade English classes. This sample included 76 boys (58%) and 55 girls (42%) with an average age of 14.47 years ($SD = 0.61$), who self-identified as Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican American. Among the participants, 70 (53%) self-identified as Mexican American, 49 described themselves as Latina/o (37%), with six indicating a Mexican ethnic identity (5%).

Measurement of Constructs

Meaning in life. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) is a self-report inventory to measure perceptions of search for and presence of meaning in life. Participants responded to 10 statements evaluated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *absolutely true* (7) to *absolutely untrue* (1). The MLQ has two subscales: Search for Meaning in Life and Presence of Meaning in Life (Steger et al., 2006). A sample item for the Presence subscale includes, "I understand my life's meaning." A sample item for the Search subscale includes, "I am always looking to find my life's purpose." Possible scores on both subscales range from 5 to 35 with higher scores representative of greater perceptions of presence of meaning in life and search for meaning in life. Reliability coefficients range from .87 to .90 on the Search subscale and .87 to .93 on the Presence subscale (Dunn & O'Brien, 2009; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Vela et al., 2014; Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). Reliability coefficients in the present sample for scores on each subscale were acceptable: Search ($\alpha = .86$) and Presence ($\alpha = .75$).

Hope. The Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991) measures participants' attitudes toward goals and objectives. Participants responded to eight statements evaluated on an 8-point Likert-type scale ranging from *definitely true* (8) to *definitely false* (1). A sample response item includes, "I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me." Possible scores range from 8 to 64 with higher scores representative of higher levels of hope. Reliability coefficients range from .77 to .81 (Sun, Tan, Fan, & Tsui, 2014; Visser, Loess, Jeglic, & Hirsch, 2012). For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .81.

Subjective happiness. The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) measures individuals' perceptions of happiness. A sample item

includes, “In general, I consider myself: (1) *not a very happy person* . . . (7) *a very happy person*.” The mean score is computed with higher scores reflective of higher levels of perceived happiness. Reliability coefficients range from .73 to .74 (Segrin & Taylor, 2007; Vela, Castro, et al., 2015). For the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .79.

Familism. The Pan-Hispanic Familism Scale (Villarreal, Blozis, & Widaman, 2005) is a self-report inventory to measure perceptions of family importance. Participants responded to five statements evaluated on a Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Sample items include, “My family is always there for me in times of need” and “I am proud of my family.” The average score is computed with higher scores reflective of higher levels of perceptions of familism. Reliability estimates range from .83 to .87 (Ojeda & Pina-Watson, 2013; Pina-Watson, Ojeda, Castellon, & Dornhecker, 2013; Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). For the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .91.

College-going beliefs. The College-Going Self-Efficacy Scale (Gibbons & Borders, 2010) is a self-report inventory to measure an individual’s confidence in pursuing college with high levels of competence. Participants responded to statements evaluated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very sure* (4). The survey’s items relate to college access (e.g., “I can go to college after high school”) and college persistence (e.g., “I could finish college and receive a college degree”). The summation of all items is used to create a college-going beliefs score with higher scores indicative of higher levels of confidence. Reliability coefficients range from .94 to .97 (Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 2012). For the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .96.

Procedure

We obtained permission from the institutional review board at a university and a school district in the southern region of the United States. Next, we informed students that participation was voluntary and that noninvolvement would not affect their grade or affiliation with the university or high school. Next, we distributed a packet to participants that was composed of a demographic questionnaire and instruments. Finally, we entered all scores into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Data Analysis

Statistical power analysis. We conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power 3 statistical power analysis program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, &

Table 1. Evaluation of Bivariate Correlations Among Predictor Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	VIF
1. Hope	*	.18	.49	.22	.25	1.41
2. Search for meaning		*	.13	.003	-.02	1.05
3. Presence of meaning			*	.10	.57	1.88
4. Family importance				*	.20	1.01
5. Subjective happiness					*	1.55

Note. VIF = variance inflation factor.

*Significant at the .05 level.

Buchner, 2007) to identify the number of participants required to establish statistical power. This analysis indicated that a minimal sample size of 55 was necessary to detect a moderate effect of our predictor variables for estimating change among characteristics predicting college-going beliefs. Given our sample of 131 participants, results are strong to make predictive inferences about the relationships among variables in the current study.

Preliminary analyses. Missing values were imputed using the series mean function in the SPSS, Version 22 (IBM Corporation, 2013). Multicollinearity among predictor variables was evaluated by inspecting bivariate correlations and variance inflation factors (see Table 1). Our analyses revealed low inter-correlations among predictor and criterion variables and variance inflation factors within the acceptable range, thus justifying the inclusion of the selected scales within a single regression model.

Primary analysis. We used a simultaneous multiple regression model to evaluate our research question related to the degree that perceived hope, subtypes of meaning, subjective happiness, and family importance were predictive of college-going beliefs. The five predictor variables in this model were regressed onto scores on college-going beliefs. We also evaluated regression coefficients and indices of practical significance. Before conducting the regression analysis, we performed *t* tests to determine whether any significant differences existed between male and female participants. Given that we did not find statistically significant differences between males and females, we did not include gender in regression models.

Results

Means and standard deviations for predictor and criterion variables are depicted in Table 2. The regression analysis yielded a statistically significant

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients for Scores Among Scales Used as Predictor Variables.

Variable	M	SD	α
Happiness	5.24	1.22	.79
Hope	51.71	8.67	.76
Search	26.87	6.70	.86
Presence	21.65	4.58	.75
Family importance	4.39	0.86	.91

Table 3. Summary of Regression Models of Positive Psychology Factors and Family Support Domains Predicting College-Going Beliefs.

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	sr^2	F	R ²
College-going beliefs						10.68***	.30
Hope	0.82	0.18	.41	4.64***	.12		
Search	-0.21	0.20	-.08	-1.06	.006		
Presence	0.56	0.20	.15	1.50	.01		
Family importance	4.16	0.39	.15	2.65**	.04		
Subjective happiness	-1.38	1.31	-.10	-1.05	.006		

*Significant at the .05 level. **Significant at the .01 level. ***Significant at the .001 level.

model, $F(5, 125) = 10.68, p < .01, R^2 = .30$, indicative of a medium effect size in which model predictors account for approximately 30% of the change among scores estimating college-going beliefs (see Table 3). Within the model, scores associated with perceived levels of hope yielded a predictive relationship ($\beta = .41, p < .05, 95\%$ confidence interval [CI] = [0.47, 1.17], $sr^2 = .12$), indicative of a medium effect size. This finding suggests that approximately 12% of change among participants' scores on college-going beliefs can alone be attributed to their degree of hope. This finding suggests that when participants reported greater levels of hope, they also tended to report higher levels of college-going beliefs. Degree of family importance was also identified as a significant predictor of college-going self-efficacy ($\beta = .15, p = .009, 95\%$ CI = [1.05, 7.27], $sr^2 = .04$), indicative of a small effect size. This finding accounted for about 4% of the variance within the model and suggests that when participants reported greater levels of family importance, they also tended to report higher levels of college-going beliefs. Nonsignificant findings were detected for scores related to subjective well-being ($\beta = .10, p = .30, 95\%$ CI = [-3.97, 1.22], $sr^2 \leq .01$), search for meaning

($\beta = -.08, p = .29, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.60, 0.18], sr^2 < .01$), and presence of meaning ($\beta = .15, p = .14, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.18, 1.35], sr^2 < .01$).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to evaluate how several positive psychology and family factors influence Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. Findings have potential to shape research and interventions to improve Mexican American adolescents' hope and familism, which might affect college-going beliefs. Our findings cast some doubt on the extent to which all but one of the intrapersonal attributes associated with positive psychology (i.e., presence of meaning in life, search for meaning, and subjective happiness) influence Mexican American adolescents' confidence in pursuing higher education. While hope served as a strong predictor of college-going beliefs, it is important to explore the origins of hope among adolescents. Hope refers to individuals' beliefs to pursue desired objectives (Feldman & Dreher, 2012) as well as confidence to make progress toward those goals (Snyder et al., 1999). Hope served as the strongest predictor of college-going beliefs among Mexican American adolescents. This finding suggests that as the amount of hope increases, the level of college-going beliefs among Mexican American adolescents increases. When Mexican American adolescents have hope that they can create a positive future, their level of confidence to pursue and persist in postsecondary education might increase. Findings from the current study build on findings from other researchers who found that hope influenced college students' psychological grit (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015) and high school students' vocational outcome expectations (Vela, Lenz, et al., 2015).

Humanistic and systems-oriented psychologists might argue that personal attributes develop in a complex interpersonal matrix—as intriguingly intimated by the importance of familism in this study. Indeed, our findings support the idea that a relational, in-context focus on increasing college-going beliefs may not only harness family importance but also tap other as yet unidentified relational factors that may promote self-efficacy in pursuing higher education. An important aspect of Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs was family importance. Familism served as a positive predictor of college-going beliefs among Mexican American adolescents. This finding suggests that as the amount of familism increases, the level of college-going beliefs increases. Researchers (Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Pina-Watson et al., 2013) found that family values or family support influenced Latina/o high school students' life satisfaction as well as Mexican American adolescents' life satisfaction. However, the question remains as to what

factors influence Mexican American adolescents' perceptions of family importance (e.g., educational support and family structure). Shifting the research focus to include more relational variables such as familism may provide more control in creating positive outcomes given the way that family education, family therapy, classroom presentations, and support groups can be orchestrated to harness relational factors that can enhance a sense of self-efficacy regarding various forms of individual achievement.

We understand that the positive psychology and family framework in the current study could have consisted of other factors to understand Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. Other factors might explain the other 70% variance that was unaccounted for by factors in the current study. Important cultural factors related to Mexican American students' development include acculturation to the Anglo culture and enculturation to the Mexican culture (Ojeda, Castillo, et al., 2014). Acculturation and enculturation might mediate or moderate relationships among positive psychology factors on Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. In addition to acculturation and enculturation, behavioral familism might also influence Mexican American adolescents' perceptions of college-going beliefs. In the current study, we used a scale that measures attitudinal familism. There also are other positive psychology factors that might influence college-going beliefs such as mindfulness, grit, curiosity, optimism, and gratitude. Researchers can continue to use a positive psychology and family framework with larger sample sizes to understand factors that influence Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations and directions for future research. First, we relied on cross-sectional data, which limit cause-and-effect inferences (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). Researchers should ideally evaluate factors using longitudinal or experimental methods to make quasi-causal inferences. Second, the homogeneity of the sample and high school population affects generalizability (Watson, 2009). All participants attended a high school with over 90% Hispanic population, thereby limiting generalizability to similar high school settings. Research should investigate whether findings can be replicated with a non-Mexican American sample of Hispanic students. In addition, there were several limitations with the instruments used in the current study. We used the Pan-Hispanic Familism Scale (Villarreal et al., 2005), which focuses on attitudinal familism, to measure family importance. Reliability coefficients in the present sample for scores on the SHS and Presence of Meaning in Life subscale were moderate ($\alpha = .79, .78$). Researchers can use scales that

focus on behavioral familism as well as confirmatory factor analyses to test validity with Mexican American populations. Researchers should also continue to investigate positive psychology and additional cultural factors that could affect Mexican American adolescents' academic achievement and college-going beliefs. Other intrapersonal and cultural factors include mindfulness, attribution style, gratitude, optimism, acculturation, and enculturation. Finally, outcome-based research with Mexican American adolescents is important. Researchers must develop and evaluate research-based interventions to increase those factors that affect Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. Researchers can use a single-case research design (Lenz, 2013) to track and measure weekly interventions to increase hope, family importance, and other measurable attributes.

Authors' Note

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