

Contextual Influences on Latino Adolescent Ethnic Identity and Academic Outcomes

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Abstract:

This study examined the association between 3 components of ethnic identity (exploration, resolution, and affirmation) and factors related to family, neighborhood, and individual characteristics. The purpose was to identify factors that are positively associated with adolescent ethnic identity among a sample of 187 Latino adolescents with a mean age of 14.61. The findings suggested that family ethnic socialization was directly associated with exploration and resolution, but not ethnic affirmation. Analyses with moderator variables suggested that associations between family ethnic socialization and ethnic affirmation varied based on parental behaviors and neighborhood characteristics. The results also suggested that ethnic affirmation, but not exploration or resolution, was positively associated with teacher reports of school performance.

Article:

Demographic changes have led to a pressing need for research on one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. population: children in immigrant families (Hernandez, 2004). While knowledge of unique developmental processes for Latino adolescents (now the largest ethnic minority group) is lacking, a promising area of research that has emerged in the last decade focuses on ethnic identity development. Numerous studies find that adolescent ethnic identity is positively associated with self-esteem across diverse ethnic minority groups (Phinney, 1995; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). This positive influence likely results from the complicated nature of identity development for immigrant adolescents because answering questions regarding "who am I?" involves confronting issues related to prejudice and cultural adjustment (Rumbaut, 1994). As a result, ethnic identity holds promise as a protective factor for Latino adolescent development. Little is known, however, regarding potential developmental antecedents or how ethnic identity may promote positive outcomes other than self-esteem.

Conceptual models describe ethnic identity as a multidimensional construct produced by exploration, resolution, and affirmation (Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, & Cota, 1993; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2004; Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004). Ethnic identity results when adolescents engage in culturally specific activities, behaviors, and roles (i.e., exploration), understand group membership (i.e., resolution), and perhaps most importantly, develop positive feelings about the self and the group (i.e., affirmation). Conceptual models also suggest that contextual factors in the family, neighborhood or peer group, and individual characteristics (i.e., language) are potential antecedents of ethnic identity. Most research emphasizes family ethnic socialization as the primary influence, and studies of Latino children suggest that parental demonstrations of culture (e.g., speaking Spanish, decorating the home) and teaching about cultural traditions and discrimination promote knowledge and positive attitudes about the ethnic group (Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993; Quintana & Vera, 1999). Studies of adolescents have produced mixed results. Phinney and colleagues (Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001) found no direct association between parental ethnic socialization and ethnic identity in adolescents from diverse cultural groups. Conversely, Umaña-Taylor and Fine (2004) found that family ethnic socialization that included teaching about their cultural background and decorating the home with cultural artifacts was positively associated with ethnic identity achievement.

Although there is a strong case for the salience of ethnic identity for Latino adolescent development, several gaps in the literature exist. First, studies should move beyond family ethnic socialization as the primary direct source of influence and consider other contextual factors related to the family, neighborhood, or individual (e.g., bilingualism, generational status) as both direct and indirect influences on ethnic identity. Interactions between contextual factors and family ethnic socialization should be considered, as efforts by Latino parents to encourage interaction with group members or to promote group pride may be enhanced or offset by the nature of the parent–child relationship or neighborhood characteristics. Second, despite the conceptual focus on distinct processes of exploration, resolution, and affirmation, most studies of ethnic identity sum subdimensions together to form an overall score of ethnic identity. This approach may obscure possible differences in both the etiology and consequences of these three elements. Moreover, recent research suggests that, while exploration and resolution are strongly correlated, affirmation does not demonstrate strong correlations with either of these two dimensions (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Studies should consider, as a result, these three elements of ethnic identity as distinct outcomes. Third, despite their promise as protective factors, few studies have assessed associations between dimensions of ethnic identity and psychosocial outcomes other than self-esteem. Given that Latino adolescents are at risk for negative school outcomes (Rumbaut, 1994), ethnic identity should be studied in reference to its potential role as a protective factor for these youth.

The purpose of this study is to address these research needs by assessing: (1) associations between components of ethnic identity (exploration, resolution, affirmation) and family ethnic socialization, parental behaviors, and characteristics of neighborhoods and individuals; (2) the relationship between Latino adolescent ethnic identity and academic outcomes; and (3) parenting, neighborhood characteristics, and gender of the adolescent as moderators of the association between family ethnic socialization and the three elements of ethnic identity.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample for this study consisted of 187 adolescents from immigrant families residing in a large metropolitan area in southern California. Nearly all of the adolescents were born in the United States to immigrant parents (from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador), and the majority of participants were bilingual (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). All adolescents in the sample spoke English. Hence, verbal instructions were presented in English and all questionnaires were completed in English. Members of the research team distributed questionnaires in classrooms and were present during the administration to answer questions and provide translation if necessary. Teachers assisted by collecting parental consent forms.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Sample

	Mean	SD	Percent
Age	14.61	1.17	
Mean percentage Latinos in neighborhood	67	17.54	
Years adolescent has lived in United States	7.71	4.62	
Mean percentage of families below poverty line in neighborhood	25	9.36	
Parental country of origin (mother)			
Mexico			66
El Salvador			25
Guatemala			9
Female			60
Adolescent born in United States			70

Parent born in country of origin	95
Bilingual (all speak English)	71
Educational level of mother	
Elementary/some high school only	68
Completed HS/GED/some college	26
Completed college	6.5

Measures

Because this sample consisted of adolescents with parents from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, preliminary analyses with structural equation modeling assessed the degree of item equivalence between these three groups of adolescents for all measures included in the study. Following the approach outlined by Byrne (2001), we found a high degree of item equivalence for measures of parenting behaviors, family ethnic socialization, and ethnic identity. Based on the item invariance, all three groups were combined in the main analyses of this study. Owing to sample size constraints, we did not specify both measurement and structural models in the main SEM model. As a result, preliminary analyses assessed the validity and factor structure of each measure separately from the final path model. Summary variables were used as observed variables in the structural model (rather than latent constructs with multiple indicators). However, the final structural model included three higher order factors (parent involvement, harsh parenting, and school performance), with the indicators of these factors being summary variables.

Ethnic identity. Adolescent ethnic identity was measured using Umaña-Taylor's Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The EIS is a 17-item self-report measure designed to assess three dimensions of adolescent ethnic identity: exploration, resolution, and affirmation. Exploration refers to adolescent engagement in activities and experiences that teach about the ethnic group (e.g., "I have attended events that have helped me learn more about my ethnicity"). Resolution measures a sense of what one's ethnicity means (e.g., "I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me"). Affirmation represents the extent to which an adolescent has developed a positive sense of group membership (e.g., "I wish I were a different ethnicity"; items reversed to indicate greater affirmation). Response options ranged from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 4 (*describes me very well*), and items were averaged to create summary scores for each subscale. This measure has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity as a multidimensional construct (see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). A confirmatory factor analysis using the present data replicated the factor structure suggested by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004) when correlations were specified between exploration and resolution and resolution and affirmation (GFI=.90, CFI=.93, RMSEA=.07). Cronbach's α s were .80, .79, and .77 for resolution, affirmation, and exploration, respectively, in these data.

Family ethnic socialization. The Family Ethnic Socialization Measure (FESM; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004) is a 12-item scale assessing adolescent reports of family promotion of participation in cultural activities and contact with ethnic traditions. Sample items include "My family celebrates holidays that are specific to my ethnic/cultural background" and "Our home is decorated with things that reflect my ethnic/cultural background." Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) through 5 (*very much*), corresponding to the adolescent's level of agreement with each statement. All 12 items were averaged together to create a summary variable. This measurement strategy demonstrated a good fit to these data (GFI=.91, CFI=.93, RMSEA=.08), and Cronbach's α was .90.

Parental behaviors. Subscales of the Parent Behavior Measure (PBM; see Bush, Supple, & Lash, 2004) assessed adolescent reports of parental support (four items), knowledge (six items), punitiveness (three items),

negative behavioral control (seven items), and coercive control (three items). The PBM has been used to collect data from adolescents in over a dozen countries as part of a larger study on cross-cultural differences in parenting. The measurement strategy used in this study was based upon validity studies using confirmatory factor analysis to assess factor structure in samples from China (Supple, Peterson, & Bush, 2004) and Mexico (Bush et al., 2004). In the current study, due to sample size constraints and missing data on fathers, only mother data were included. Sample items included: "My mother seems to approve of me and the things I do" (support), "My mother knows where I am after school" (knowledge), "My mother punishes me by not letting me do things that I really enjoy" (punitiveness), "My mother yells at me a lot without good reason" (negative control), and "My mother tells me that if I loved her, I would do what she wants me to do" (coerciveness). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) and were averaged to create summary variables. Maternal support and knowledge were then used as indicators of a higher order factor labeled parental involvement. Punitiveness, negative control, and coerciveness were loaded onto a higher order harsh parenting factor. This factor structure demonstrated a good fit to the data (GFI=.94, CFI=.97, RMSEA=.06 for involvement; GFI=.93, CFI=.96, RMSEA=.05 for harsh parenting). Cronbach's α for the summary variables ranged from .67 to .84.

School performance. Teacher reports of grades, work habits, and cooperation were obtained from school records for six classes in which students were enrolled at the time of the survey. Grades were based on a 4.0 scale and averaged across classes to create a grade point average indicator. Work habits and cooperation scores were based on a 3-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*unsatisfactory*) to 3 (*excellent*) and were averaged across classes. These three indicators were specified to load on a higher order factor called school performance.

Perceived neighborhood risk. Adolescents responded to 10 items indicating the extent to which they perceived their neighborhood as characterized by a high degree of risk (Bámaca, Umaña-Taylor, Shin, & Alfaro, 2005). Sample items include "In my neighborhood I have seen many illegal acts" and "In my neighborhood many people use drugs or have a drinking problem." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), and were coded so that a higher score indicated a higher perception of risk. Items were averaged to create a composite variable with a Cronbach's α coefficient of .84. Confirmatory factor analysis results suggested a good fit for the specification of this measure as a unidimensional construct. One item demonstrated a low factor loading and was eliminated ("low value of education among neighbors"; GFI=.94, CFI=.96, RMSEA=.08).

Additional variables. Census data at the block group level were used to compute variables representing the percentage of Latino residents in the block group and percentage of families below the poverty line. Adolescents were also asked to indicate where family members were born (including the adolescent) and whether the adolescent primarily speaks English, Spanish, or both. Dichotomous variables were created for adolescents born in the U.S.A. (1=*born in U.S.A.*, 0=*not*) and whether adolescents were bilingual or not (1=*bilingual*, 0=*English only*).

Analysis Plan and Preliminary Analyses

Structural equation modeling with Amos (Byrne, 2001) was the analysis strategy to: (1) examine path coefficients from all exogenous predictor variables to the three dimensions of ethnic identity and school performance, (2) examine the associations between ethnic identity and school performance, and (3) examine possible moderating effects of parenting behaviors, neighborhood characteristics, and gender on the associations between family ethnic socialization and each dimension of ethnic identity.

A "main effects" model was specified where all exogenous variables had paths leading to each of the three dimensions of ethnic identity, as well as to school performance. Paths from each indicator of ethnic identity to school performance are also included in this model. Following the procedures described by Jaccard and Wan (1996), moderation was examined by following the main effects model with an additional model that included family ethnic socialization by parenting and neighborhood product terms. These product terms were computed by multiplying family ethnic socialization by each element of both parental involvement and harsh parenting and by neighborhood risk (variables were mean centered). Significant product terms suggest a moderator effect and in cases where moderation was detected, post hoc analyses probed the nature of the interaction by examining regression coefficients for the association between family ethnic socialization and all three elements of ethnic identity at high versus low levels of the moderator (using median splits). Gender-as-moderator analyses included a multigroup SEM approach to compare statistically regression coefficients between boys and girls (Byrne, 2001; Jaccard & Wan, 1996).

Results

Factors Related to Adolescent Ethnic Identity

The main effects model demonstrated a good fit to these data (GFI=.90, CFI=.93, RMSEA=.06; see Figure 1 and Table 2 for coefficients). The results suggested that family ethnic socialization was positively associated with both ethnic exploration and resolution, but not significantly related to ethnic affirmation. While parental involvement was not significantly associated with any dimension of ethnic identity, harsh parenting was negatively related to affirmation but not exploration or resolution. Perceived neighborhood risk was unrelated to ethnic exploration and resolution, but negatively associated with affirmation. Percentage of Latinos in the adolescent's neighborhood demonstrated a positive association with ethnic affirmation, and the percentage of families below the poverty line was negatively associated with ethnic exploration. Adolescent bilingualism, generational status, and age were unrelated to any dimension of ethnic identity. There were, however, marginally significant associations between bilingualism and generational status (born in the United States) and greater levels of ethnic affirmation.

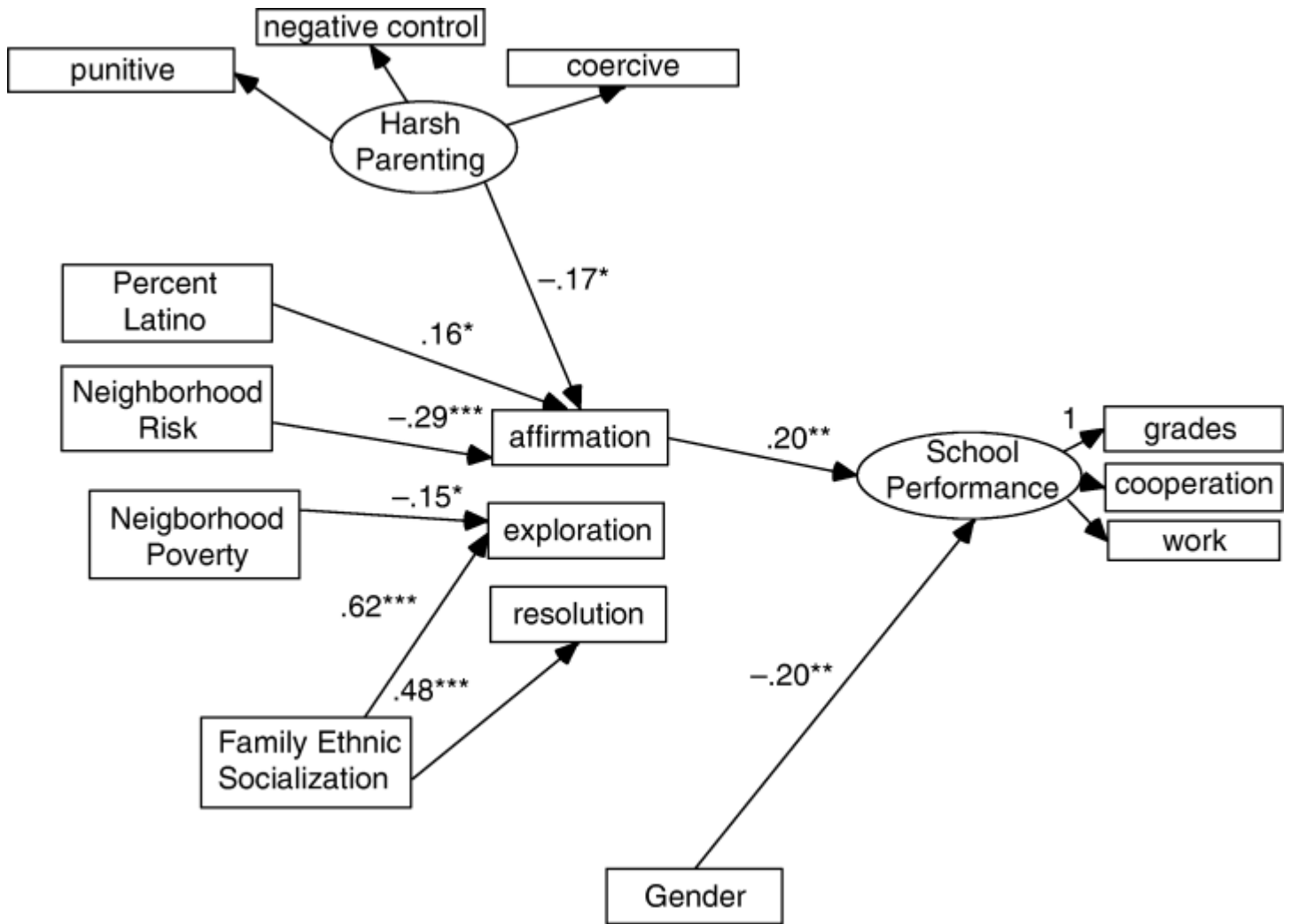


Figure 1. Statistically significant path coefficients from contextual influence to three dimensions of ethnic identity and from ethnic identity to school performance. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, nonsignificant paths are omitted from the model.

Table 2

Standardized Regression Paths Predicting Ethnic Identity

	Ethnic exploration	Ethnic resolution	Ethnic affirmation
Family ethnic socialization	.62***	.48***	.00
Parental involvement	.03	.07	.05
Harsh parenting	.06	.04	-.17*
Neighborhood risk	.06	.02	-.29***
Percent Latino	.03	.06	.16*
Percent below poverty line	-.15*	-.05	-.03
Born in United States	.01	.09	.13 ⁺
Bilingual	.00	.10	.13 ⁺
Age	-.02	.02	.00

Gender	-.04	.04	-.07
FESM × parental involvement			.33*
FESM × harsh parenting			-.30*
FESM × neighborhood risk			-.18*
R^2	.41	.25	.22

Note. FESM=Family Ethnic Socialization. Coefficients for product terms are unstandardized β s.

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Ethnic Identity as a Predictor of School Performance

As illustrated in Figure 1, while ethnic exploration and resolution were not associated with school performance, there was a positive relationship between ethnic identity affirmation and this outcome. Gender was negatively related to school performance (i.e., males rated lower by teachers). There was a marginally significant negative association between neighborhood risk and school performance and positive associations between generational status and bilingualism and school performance (see Table 2). Based on these results, it appears that Latino adolescents who possess more positive feelings toward their ethnicity, and girls, were rated higher by teachers on grades, cooperation, and work.

Moderator Models

Parental involvement, harsh parenting, perceived neighborhood risk, gender of the adolescent, percentage Latinos in the neighborhood, and percentage of families below the poverty line in the neighborhood were considered as potential moderators of the association between family ethnic socialization and adolescent ethnic identity. Significant product terms suggested that the association between family ethnic socialization and ethnic affirmation varied by parental involvement (unstandardized $B = .33$, $p = .03$), harsh parenting ($B = -.30$, $p = .01$), and perceived neighborhood risk ($B = -.18$, $p = .02$). There were no significant interactions between family ethnic socialization and either ethnic exploration or resolution.

To illustrate the nature of the moderator effects, separate analyses linked family ethnic socialization to affirmation at high versus low levels of each moderator variable. Median splits were used to create high and low categorical groups, and coefficients for high and low levels of parental involvement, harsh parenting, and neighborhood risk were compared. At high levels of involvement, the association between family ethnic socialization and ethnic affirmation was positive ($B = .13$, $p = .02$). Conversely, this same association was negative and nonsignificant ($B = -.13$, $p = .06$) for the low involvement group. The association between family ethnic socialization and affirmation also varied by levels of harsh parenting, with family ethnic socialization more negatively related to ethnic affirmation at higher levels of harsh parenting. In the context of a high-risk neighborhood, family ethnic socialization was associated with reduced levels of ethnic affirmation ($B = -.16$, $p = .03$), and at low levels of neighborhood risk, this association was positive ($B = .17$, $p = .00$).

Implications and Discussion

Based on the main effects model, it appears that, while a strong predictor of ethnic exploration and resolution, family ethnic socialization was not related to affirmation. This finding has important implications for the literature as the bulk of previous work on ethnic identity has considered familial ethnic socialization to be the primary means by which ethnic pride is promoted in the young (Bernal et al., 1993; Knight et al., 1993; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Although familial encouragement to participate in cultural activities and socialize with group members may lead to increased cultural activities and group knowledge by adolescents, these socialization efforts do not necessarily promote increased positive affect toward the group. The association

between family ethnic socialization and ethnic affirmation may be complicated, however, as it seems to depend upon contextual factors in the family and neighborhood.

At high levels of parental involvement, low levels of harsh parenting, and low levels of perceived neighborhood risk, we observed positive relationships between family ethnic socialization and affirmation. At low levels of parental involvement, high harsh parenting, and high neighborhood risk, this same association becomes more negative. A major implication of these findings is that efforts by parents to promote feelings of group pride may depend upon broader contextual factors such as the relationship with mothers and the safety of the environment within which adolescents live. In contexts with few positive group role models, increased pressure may be on parents to create positive views of the group (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Furthermore, parents residing in risky neighborhoods with few positive role models may inadvertently undermine their adolescent's sense of group pride by encouraging participation in cultural activities. In such environments, parents may need to be especially supportive of children and seek out positive interactions with cultural group members (perhaps outside of the neighborhood) as a means to boost ethnic affirmation.

An additional implication of the findings is that ethnic identity may hold promise as a protective factor for school outcomes for second-generation Latino immigrants. The results suggest that adolescents reporting higher levels of ethnic affirmation are rated higher by their teachers on grades, cooperation, and schoolwork (but exploration and resolution are unrelated). In addition to revealing a promising area for future research on academic adjustment for Latinos, this result also reaffirms the need for research on specific dimensions of ethnic identity. Future research should continue to consider dimensions of ethnic identity individually as they appear to differentially relate to both antecedents of ethnic identity and school performance. Based on these data, exploration and resolution may be important elements to the overall process of identity development (Phinney, 1995), but they may have less salience to the overall well-being of immigrant youth than affirmation.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations associated with the methods of this study need to be acknowledged. This study used cross-sectional data and primarily relied on adolescent reports to assess family process variables, neighborhood risk, and ethnic identity. Caution is needed when considering possible causal relationships between ethnic identity and what are considered to be contextual influences. Teacher reports of school performance were included, as were Census-based data. As a result, findings concerning these items are not confounded by measurement error.

Although caution should be applied given the cross-sectional study design, these results point to important contextual factors that may play a role in the etiology of ethnic identity. These results, moreover, should stimulate future longitudinal designs with multiple informants. Longitudinal designs might consider prospective associations between parenting behaviors and ethnic socialization during childhood or early adolescence and ethnic identity development throughout adolescence and into young adulthood. Longitudinal research would also elucidate the nature of the association between affirmation and school performance and would allow for modeling of possible bidirectional effects. Additionally, future research should consider reports from other family members, particularly the parents, to assess the extent to which shared method variance distorts the associations between family ethnic socialization and adolescent ethnic identity.

The current study adds to the literature by demonstrating that important contextual influences on ethnic identity vary in their association with distinct elements of ethnic identity. The results also suggested that parental involvement and neighborhood characteristics are moderators that may shape the influence that family ethnic socialization may have on the internalization of group pride among Latino adolescents. Ethnic affirmation, moreover, was found to be a positive predictor of school outcomes.

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