

Parks as social and cultural spaces among U.S.-born and foreign-born Latinas

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Abstract:

Parks provide opportunities for people to engage in activities that can promote physical and emotional well-being. Using focus groups and personal interviews conducted in select neighborhoods of a Northeastern city with a high rate of obesity, we examined perceptions of barriers and facilitators regarding the use of parks and park features that would promote physical activity among Latina women ($N = 39$). Foreign-born Latinas emphasized the environmental characteristics of parks and the types of amenities that can support preferred cultural and social activities, while U.S.-born Latinas emphasized the use of parks for physical activity and weight management. Most striking were the different ways in which foreign-born participants conceptualized parks as sociocultural family centers, extending more common conceptualizations centered on exercise or individual health gain. These findings suggest the need for new policies that incorporate culturally specific park programming to promote national goals of increasing levels of physical activity for health.

Keywords: parks | sociocultural spaces | physical activity | Latina women

Article:

Sedentary lifestyles and lack of engagement in physical activity are linked to obesity, mortality, and chronic health conditions (Carlson, Brooks, Brown, & Buchner, 2010). However, public parks and open spaces can provide opportunities for adults and children to improve their health by engaging in activities that promote physical and emotional well-being (Bush et al., 2007; Casagrande, Gittelsohn, Zonderman, Evans, & Gary-Webb, 2011). If parks are to offer truly useful options for health promotion, they must appeal to a wide range of users. But evidence suggests that park access and use differ by demographic and socioeconomic status, with racially/ethnically diverse groups and the poor having fewer parks in their communities (Moore, Diez Roux, Evenson, McGinn, & Brines, 2008). Building new urban parks or upgrading existing ones could provide a partial solution. But to maximize their use, it is important to prioritize the preferences of the diverse communities that surround them (Slater, Pugach, Lin, & Bontu, 2016).

Recent research indicates that Latinos of all racial/ethnic groups, and Latina women in particular, are more likely to be obese when compared with other groups. They are also more likely to be

physically inactive (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010; Lebrun et al., 2013). For foreign-born Latina women, the immigration experience can affect physical health and promote weight gain (Goulao, Santos, & Carmo, 2015). Given this evidence, and the high levels of physical inactivity observed among Latinos as a group (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015a), it would be especially useful to explore how different groups of Latina women perceive and use public parks for physical activity and health. Thus, this study examines perceptions of public park use for physical activity among two contrasting groups: English-speaking, U.S.-born Latina women and Spanish-speaking, foreign-born Latina women living in inner city neighborhoods located near an urban park.

Latinos and Health

More than 50 million Latinos from diverse backgrounds and nations live in the United States. Latinos have a disproportionate burden of chronic health conditions, including obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and other related comorbidities, that disproportionately affect them (CDC, 2015a). They are also 1.2 times as likely to be obese as non-Hispanic Whites, and Latino children in particular are 1.6 times more likely to be overweight than non-Hispanic White children (Office of Minority Health [OMH], 2016b). Latina women tend to have a higher body mass index (BMI > 30) and a higher prevalence of type 2 diabetes when compared with other ethnic groups (OMH, 2016a).

There is increasing recognition that the built environment can promote more active living and hence contribute to reduced obesity risk. Proximity to parks is associated with increased physical activity and a lower prevalence of obesity, which can ultimately reduce the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and related comorbidities (CDC, 2015b). However, the literature on the use of parks for physical activity by racially/ethnically diverse groups has been mixed. A national population-based study on the use of parks reported no differences in perceived access to parks and use of parks by race/ethnicity, but concerns about the lack of designated areas for different types of physical activity, safety, and the poor quality of urban park amenities did differ by race/ethnicity (Carlson et al., 2010). Additional literature on recreational activities and leisure also points out variability among diverse ethnic populations in patterns of park use, setting preferences, and restrictions to park activity (Derose, Han, Williamson, Cohen, & RAND Corporation, 2015; Floyd, Spengler, Maddock, Gobster, & Suau, 2008).

Urban park amenities and commonly found activities can either constrain or facilitate park-based physical activity (Floyd et al., 2008). For Latinos, parks are perceived as places where people can enjoy environmental, sociocultural, and psychological benefits (Larsen, Pekmezi, Marquez, Benitez, & Marcus, 2013), and some evidence indicates that foreign-born Latinos and particularly Latina women commonly perceive park amenities as unattractive and unappealing for physical activity (Mama et al., 2015). With greater numbers of Latino families settling in urban neighborhoods, it is becoming increasingly important to understand and account for their diverse park use preferences to encourage greater physical activity and better health outcomes.

The perceived benefits of exercise and physical activity in reducing the risk of developing poor health outcomes are well popularized in mainstream U.S. culture. However, the adoption of exercise and its health effects may not be as well understood or endorsed among Latina women,

who may be more rooted in their own specific cultural beliefs and social practices. Although physical activity in the form of extended vigorous exercise is less frequent among Latina women, there is evidence suggesting that Latinas engage in short sessions of moderate physical activity rather than long sessions of vigorous physical activity (Smith et al., 2014). Moreover, Latina women's physical activity levels may be more related to the type of work they do than to leisure activity that includes exercise (Koniak-Griffin, Brecht, Takayanagi, Villegas, & Melendrez, 2014).

Purpose

This study examined perceptions of public park use for physical activity among two contrasting groups: English-speaking, U.S.-born Latina women and Spanish-speaking, foreign-born Latina women living in an inner city neighborhood located near an urban park. It explored barriers and facilitators of park use for health and recreation among Latino groups located in a group of neighborhoods within a city considered to be an emerging Latino destination (Wu, 2011). We sought to understand differences in perceptions of park features that impact physical activity from the perspective of Latina women in particular. We end by proposing policy and intervention strategies that would better meet the social and cultural preferences of diverse local Latino communities to promote increased use of parks for physical and enhanced social well-being.

Method

Study Participants

Latinos currently represent nearly 20% of New Jersey's population (Pew Research Center, 2016). This qualitative study was conducted with Latina women living in different neighborhoods of Essex County, New Jersey, near a newly opened park. Essex County is the most diverse county in the state, and most people live within half a mile of a park; however, almost 30% of the county's population reports no leisure time physical activity (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2015). Recruitment for this study took place from 2011 to 2012 and was undertaken in collaboration with a not-for-profit community-based organization that provides a range of services to Latinos and other racially/ethnically diverse groups living in an ethnically diverse New Jersey city. The data for the present study were part of a larger effort to assess the impact of the opening of the new local park (Echeverria, Luan Kang, Isasi, Johnson-Dias, & Pacquiao, 2014), and examine how perceptions of this physical activity resource differed across racial/ethnic groups. Both U.S.-born and foreign-born Latina women who identified as primary caregivers of children under 18 were invited to participate by outreach workers from the organizations' social programs. Latina women were selected because they represent an urban racially/ethnically diverse group at high risk for obesity and chronic illness related to diminished physical activity (Ickes & Sharma, 2012; Smith et al., 2014). A total of 42 women were invited to participate, and 39 enrolled in the study. Reasons given by those who declined included job-related conflicts and previous commitments. A final convenience sample of 23 Spanish-speaking foreign-born and 16 English-speaking U.S.-born Latina women residing in a range of nearby community neighborhoods participated in either one of five focus groups or four interviews.

Focus Group and Interview Guide

The study's focus group and interview guide explored participants' everyday experiences and the use of the park and surrounding neighborhood for physical activity. The same semistructured guide was used for both focus groups and interviews, but we present only focus group data here. The guide asked about neighborhood names and labels; differences between the current neighborhood and prior neighborhoods; changes in the area over time; use of local resources such as stores, parks, and transportation; and use of parks for physical activity during warm and cold seasons. It also probed for perceived differences in gender-related physical activity in adults and children, types of physical activity preferred, potential impact of parks on children's health, and barriers and facilitators impacting local park use. Finally, the guide explored participant perceptions of the differences between U.S. parks and neighborhoods, and those found in their home countries.

Data Collection

Study investigators or community outreach workers contacted women agreeing to participate in the study and coordinated the time, date, and location of each focus group or interview. Focus groups and interviews were conducted at a time and date convenient to participants in private rooms located either at the organization's facilities or at a public library. All locations were within walking distance of targeted residential areas.

Participants signed consent forms and completed verbal and written information about the study in their language of preference. Participants also completed a demographic survey prior to participating in the focus group or interview and were given US\$20 grocery cards to compensate them for their time and contribution. Two focus groups were conducted in Spanish with foreign-born Latinas, and three focus groups were conducted in English with U.S.-born Latinas. Four interviews were also conducted, but we present only focus group data here. Study investigators, fluent in both English and Spanish, facilitated focus group discussions. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed; a research assistant took notes during each. Recordings were transcribed verbatim in the language recorded by a bilingual transcriptionist. Demographic information was also collected prior to each session via a brief questionnaire.

Participants were reminded that participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time or decline to answer questions with which they were not comfortable. Throughout data collection, researchers encouraged candidness, detailed descriptions, contextualizing, in-depth understanding, and emergent conversations. The process used in both interviews and focus groups emphasized free expression and egalitarianism via active listening, probing, and asking follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of the issues being expressed, providing the research team with rich in-depth examples of participants' experiences regarding perceptions of park use and physical activity. To strengthen the integrity of the data, facilitators followed up on participants' main concerns in both interview and focus group discussions, and these probes facilitated data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

The present study is based on a qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts, which were analyzed in the original language recorded. During the first stage of analysis, transcripts were reviewed and manually coded by two of the study investigators using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), and a preliminary codebook was developed. During the second stage, transcripts were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data management program, and independent coding continued, utilizing the codebook as a guide. Emergent meaning units were identified and condensed, preserving participants' primary expressions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this process, new codes were generated from the data and interpreted within the context of each interview and focus group. Codes were grouped within content areas and further abstracted into categories and subcategories. During the latter part of this process, both coders worked together to reach agreement on the final codes and search for participants' own understanding and conceptual categories.

Results

Participant Characteristics

All of our participants were female, were Latina, and cared for children who lived with them, usually their own (data not shown). Foreign-born study participants had lived in the local neighborhood for between 6 months and 6 years; they all spoke Spanish as their primary language. They had migrated to the United States from Puerto Rico, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Central America, and had close relatives by blood or marriage living in the area. U.S.-born participants had lived in local neighborhoods for between 3 and 35 years, although many had lived locally for 10 years or more. Most were of Puerto Rican descent except for one who was of Dominican descent. More than half of all study participants were overweight for their height (M BMI = 29). Participant incomes ranged from US\$10,000 to US\$42,000 a year, and all lived in a household with two or more people.

Emergent Themes

Four strongly related themes regarding perceptions of parks and physical activity emerged among our study participants: (a) differing strategies of park use, (b) differing park design preferences, (c) parks as exercise centers versus social and cultural centers, and (d) differing concepts of exercise.

Differing strategies of park use. Both foreign-born women and U.S.-born women explained that either they or their parents had come to the United States to give their children a better education and the hope of a better life. However, both groups also voiced overlapping concerns about safety. U.S.-born women reported frustration at spending more time indoors in the United States than they did when visiting their families overseas, where they were significantly more active. Foreign-born women spoke of limiting their time outdoors and feeling isolated; most said that their current neighborhood was more dangerous than their old neighborhood at home.

I say that there [country of origin] is more free, more freedom, one is in danger here. For example, here, in this block there is much danger after dark, I no longer go out after it

gets dark, I am afraid. However in [country of origin] you can walk until 12, 1, 2 in the morning and nothing happens. (Foreign-born woman)

I lived in [my country of origin] for two years, and it's a totally different world. It's like more freedom, there are more outdoor activities there . . . It's like you gotta be very careful [here] to let your kids out, there's certain times that I go outside. You've got to be very careful of where you go [here], what you do, it's different. (U.S.-born woman)

While both groups articulated the same problem, each group approached the problem somewhat differently. Foreign-born Latinas emphasized the importance of accompanying their children to the park at all times and supervising their play, often taking great care to describe in detail the specific risks that troubled them:

I believe that right now, there are many young men from other places that come to disturb the tranquility of our children. Lately we heard that they are over there showing and giving them marijuana . . . they will always be there at the park, they have always been there . . . And my son knows . . . they are there, and they show it to you. One small envelope, packed. (Foreign-born woman)

Foreign-born mothers reported never allowing their children to go to parks unaccompanied by adults, and they frequently visited the park as an extended family group. This approach had the advantage of allowing close supervision of children's park-based play, as families often played games and sports together.

U.S.-born women were more likely to take a different approach. Some also preferred to accompany their children to the park whenever possible, but many emphasized teaching their children how to remain safe when walking to and playing in the park and going to school. These mothers utilized strategies such as allowing their children to play in the park only during particular hours, asking them to check in periodically, and sending siblings (usually boys) to the park in pairs or groups to ensure that all went well. While U.S.-born Latinas also expressed concern about their children's safety and frequently described taking them to the park, they were more likely to allow their children the freedom to go to local parks without constant adult supervision.

Yeah, the boys go [together] almost every day . . . you know it's right there by my house . . . they do their chores just to go to the park. (U.S.-born woman)

I tell them to check in. The big boys, now I do . . . now they check in. You know I say, every 15, 20 minutes, come in, I want to see that you're okay. (U.S.-born woman)

Differing park design preferences. When foreign-born women described local parks, they quickly pointed out what they saw missing. Like their U.S.-born counterparts, they noted the absence of playground equipment, sufficient ball courts, and limited playground areas, but they also made additional observations. Foreign-born women complained that local parks had no water fountains, food and water options for purchase were undependable or nonexistent, and

families were forced to carry their own supplies. These observations made more sense after foreign-born women described the “parks” of their home cities.

Over there in [country of origin], we call them Zócalos (plazas) . . . [There are] park . . . , kiosks by the plaza, where people get together at night. Over there you go to look for a boyfriend . . . [People like] to play music [there] . . . there is also live music and everything . . . They sell mango with chili, cold drinks, so we enjoy that. (Foreign-born women)

Yes, it is quite different because there are always vendors everywhere. And here (laughs), no! If you do not bring your own water, you don't have a drink. Not there. There is always someone selling something over there. Or even you can always find an open faucet.

They missed a faucet in this park. They made it really nice but it is missing a lot of things.

In the United States, these would be recognized as central plazas or town squares. Across Latin America, town squares are central to community life (Crowhurst Lennard, 2015). In addition to providing access to tree-filled green spaces, they offer benches and children's play equipment, as do parks in the United States. However, key differences include the constant presence of reliable food vendors who set up their carts around the outer edge of the plaza; children's entertainment activities also take place during both day and evening hours. Because of their social nature, plazas are frequent destinations for family walks, courting couples, and friends who want to chat. However, fitness-related amenities like basketball courts, swings, and running tracks are generally not featured.

None of the U.S.-born Latinas described local park deficiencies in terms of their dissimilarity to town squares. For them, the lack of food vendors was not as important as it was for foreign-born Latinas, although two U.S.-born women mentioned seeing occasional food trucks. Most did not focus on the topic of food at all. On the whole, U.S.-born women did not appear disgruntled or unhappy because they could not count on the convenience of buying food and water at the park. Instead, they focused on the lack of sufficient play equipment. These women were just as likely to wish for water sprinklers for their children to play in as they were to mention missing water fountains:

I'd like to see like a wet area there, in the summer. Like summer where, where the kids can play and get wet . . . like a water sprinkler. (U.S.-born women)

Maybe they can include sprinklers in the parks . . . with sprinklers in the parks, even I will go and get wet.

Parks as exercise centers versus social and cultural centers. Foreign-born women spoke about the park as a place to meet and relax with family members and acquaintances. They expounded on the sports and family games played by their children and husbands and emphasized both the positive psychological and physical impact of green spaces on their children's health. They

rarely, if ever, spoke of going to the park as part of a personal exercise regimen, unlike U.S.-born women who mentioned this frequently, especially in regard to walking for weight loss. For the foreign-born Latinas in our sample, parks were perceived as places in which their families socialized with other families of similar cultural backgrounds.

And sometimes we miss them when they do not come . . . everyone meets at the park; we all know each other. And so do the kids. Well, even though we don't know each other's names, we do know each other's faces, and we see all the mothers. I am that boy's mother. [Laughs] Or even the kids, [would say], my friend did not come. They already know each other, and even if they did not yet know each other, they would play the same with any kid; they adjust. (Foreign-born women)

We meet with . . . other acquaintances and friends, then we form a group . . .

U.S.-born Latinas placed much less emphasis on community socialization and networking. They were less likely to describe going to the park and playing games as a family or meeting other families to engage for sports. These women took their children to the park as a way of allowing them to "burn excess energy" with other children. They readily described their own personal exercise regimens and physical activities in the park without being asked, and said that they wanted to start walking in the park for health and weight loss. These women emphasized individual physical activity (their own and their childrens') instead of focusing on the opportunity for group activities.

. . . When [my daughter is] at the park, I like taking her because . . . she tries to talk to other kids . . . And I'm like . . . go play (to burn excess energy), go with your brother. (U.S.-born woman)

[I use the] track where everybody . . . you're not the only one there. You go and you feel comfortable because there's a lot of people there early in the morning, walking [in the park]. (U.S.-born woman)

Differing concepts of exercise. U.S.-born and foreign-born Latinas also differed in their perceptions of what constitutes physical activity and their reasons for engaging (or not engaging) in exercise. Foreign-born women equated physical activity with household chores and child care activities. They emphasized the importance of walking to the supermarket or taking children to and from school. For them, chasing after their children, cleaning their homes, and working in their yards was evidence of a physically active life. A few spoke of walking and exercising for the sake of fitness, but this was unusual. Foreign-born Latinas connected physical activity with daily work. U.S.-born women talked about doing similar domestic activities but did not perceive these activities as ways of doing physical exercise; rather, they perceived domestic activities as interfering with their opportunities to exercise.

Yes, because I walk . . . , well at least during the day I get up, I go to leave the boy at school, I come back, go to work. I return, bring the boy back [from school], I come back to cook and do homework, take him to do karate, go back, and give him dinner. It was all day . . . , activities. That's exercise for me. (Foreign-born women)

Well I was going to the gym but stuff happened in my life that I just stopped going because I didn't really have someone to watch over my kids, and it's hard going to work . . . to picking up the kids . . . to going to the gym, doing exercise, by the time you finished you gotta pick up the kids, go back home, do homework. I was like, ugh, it's . . . I just stay home and exercise at home. It's hard, it's a hassle, and it's very hard. (U.S.-born woman)

When asked about what kinds of physical activity they would like to engage in should they decide to start exercising more, the most popular answers given by foreign-born women were dancing and, to a lesser extent, volleyball. Dancing was described as both a fun and culturally important activity. Several participants mentioned the importance of teaching their children culturally preferred dance styles in school, church, or during after school activities. Many voiced the opinion that dancing should be considered an important form of physical activity and wished for community classes that could teach their children to dance.

I like to do aerobics and dance . . . , regatón, zumba and salsa . . . , to keep up with modern trends. (Foreign-born women)

They [churches and schools] should have folk dancing, music, and they don't have it.

U.S.-born women were much more likely to talk about physical activity as an end in and of itself, pursued for the twin benefits of weight loss and physical health, than were foreign-born women. Also unlike foreign-born women, they expressed interest in exercises that could target specific body parts or help them manage their weight. While foreign-born women also mentioned weight loss as important, they were much less likely to say that they exercised for the sake of weight loss and physical health alone, and they never conceptualized their bodies as separate parts that could be improved by particular exercises.

I would work on my butt; the little love handles. (U.S.-born women)

I exercise because I don't want to gain weight.

Interestingly, U.S.-born women also saw exercise as closely linked with self-esteem, while foreign-born women never mentioned this connection. Several U.S.-born women asserted that schools should include content about self-esteem in gym classes particularly to encourage more physical activity in girls.

. . . self-esteem has to do with getting girls to exercise in gym class (at school) . . . it's all about self-esteem first. It's you feeling good about yourself, and you know, everybody has the potential. (U.S.-born woman)

U.S.-born women reported walking as their most popular dedicated physical activity, but they sometimes described using treadmills in place of or in addition to walking outside. This group appeared to view walking and other physical activity as an individually driven activity that could sometimes target specific body parts. For them, physical activity was related to self-esteem. They

saw socializing while exercising as a desirable add-on, rather than as a necessary or intrinsic component of physical activity. This was very different from the descriptions of family games and community play offered by foreign-born women. Finally, some U.S.-born women shared that not living closer to a park was a deterrent to walking.

It's probably because I don't have a park nearby, so you know that's why I don't consider walking. If the park was nearby, then I would consider walking more, definitely. (U.S.-born woman)

Discussion

Our study examined Latina women's perceptions of park design, as well as their preferences and beliefs regarding physical activity and park-related leisure. We also explored barriers to and facilitators of park use and found differences between U.S.-born and foreign-born Latinas in how parks are conceptualized based on cultural traditions of socialization and networking from women's countries of origin. Foreign-born women valued long-standing family traditions from their home countries regarding community-based activities and park-related family and group entertainment, rather than activities pursued for individual health gain. Safety was also described as a pivotal requirement for making parks more attractive to Latina women and their families for physical activity and recreational use.

Despite the fact that our study participants knew about and supported health benefits related to park-based physical activity and even used parks in this way, safety concerns and limited access to parks were described as reasons for not using neighborhood parks more often. These findings support reports about fear and perceived safety in the use of parks and physical activity in adults (Jorgensen, Ellis, & Ruddell, 2012). However, foreign-born women in our study often chose to stay home and provide indoor activities for their children where they could watch them closely, whereas U.S.-born women were more likely to counsel their children about how to stay safe while playing, send them to the park in groups, or ask them to check in periodically. Both groups of women expressed concern about children potentially being exposed to unsafe activities such as drug sales and throwaway paraphernalia they sometimes encountered when visiting neighborhood parks, but it is possible that foreign-born women, who found themselves living in an unfamiliar urban community, perceived protecting their children as a greater challenge than U.S.-born women. Foreign-born women also used the park in large family groups, both because of cultural preferences and concerns about children's safety. And although U.S.-born women were also concerned with their children's safety, they appeared to feel more at ease allowing their children to go to the park on their own, perhaps because many had grown up or lived longer in their current neighborhoods and knew what to advise children about staying safe.

The women in our sample noted that park distance, neighborhood walkability, and lack of drinking fountains and bathroom facilities were factors that weighed heavily in their decision to use parks. This finding supports earlier studies indicating that park distance, access to safe walkable paths, and feeling safe while walking in the neighborhood are strong determinants of park use for leisure or physical activity (Martinez, Arredondo, Perez, & Baquero, 2009). Results also support prior studies indicating that the lack of amenities and resources available in urban

parks can constraint or facilitate residents' use of parks for physical activity and socializing (Das, Fan, & French, 2016).

A recent study has shown that neighborhood-level factors can serve as deterrents to active living (Mama et al., 2015). Although both groups mentioned that facilities such as basketball courts and soccer fields were important, foreign-born women referred to parks as places that should involve a variety of activities that include immediate and extended family and enhance socializing with others. This finding differs from those of other studies reporting that specific park facilities such as sports designated areas are attractive to youth and young adults but are not necessarily perceived as important to activities that can incorporate participation by all family members (Kaczynski et al., 2014; Schipperijn, Bentsen, Troelsen, Toftager, & Stigsdotter, 2013).

Thus, our study revealed that foreign-born women conceptualized parks as spaces for socializing and entertainment rather than as resources largely for physical activity. In many Spanish-speaking countries, plazas and city squares are used by community members to gather and socialize, a tradition established by Spaniards and local native communities (Crowhurst Lennard, 2015). Foreign-born women emphasized that parks in their countries of origin offered a range of amenities, from food and drink to kiosks selling merchandise to musical entertainment. They described the lack of attractive amenities and infrastructure in their neighborhoods parks as important challenges to their use. The need for town squares and gathering sites that promote socialization is also shared in U.S. communities (International Making Cities Livable, 2015). It is important to note that the occasionally noted presence of a hot dog truck or ice cream vendor is very different from an established tradition of park vendors who can be counted on to provide the attractive amenities that the foreign-born women in our sample desired.

Our findings have direct policy implications as they suggest that the design of parks should incorporate amenities that respond to local cultural and social needs to enhance access and utilization by diverse groups (Slater et al., 2016). Some examples include the types of amenities that could support preferred cultural activities such as musical entertainment, snacking, and shopping as described by the foreign-born Latinas in our study. The concept of parks as described by these women resembles the conceptual model of parks proposed by Bedimo-Rung, Mowen, and Cohen (2005). In the Bedimo-Rung model, park characteristics are envisioned as "six conceptual areas that operate through four geographic areas to support physical activity within parks" (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005, p. 163). In keeping with their park design preferences and the specifics of the Bedimo-Rung model, our participants emphasized the benefits of urban parks that support necessary activities (fountains for drinking, working restrooms) that include designated adult and children's park activity areas, cross-age-socialization spaces, areas for age and gender specific activities (such as dancing), an environment that supports culturally based family and group activities (such as sports like soccer), and networking among park users.

The finding that foreign-born women strongly preferred park amenities that can promote networking is novel. This might be a reflection of feelings of isolation and their need to create neighborhood connections for the purpose of building personal as well as neighborhood social capital for health and well-being (Carpiano, 2008). As newly arrived immigrants, we found that the foreign-born women in our study who visited parks benefited more from the social connections they made and the opportunities parks offered for building relationships with

families of similar cultural backgrounds than they did from the chance to engage in physical activity. Rather than being an obstacle to better health, this may be an important step toward enhancing physical health for foreign-born Latinas. Previous research suggests that social support may be especially relevant to physical activity practices that promote the cardiovascular health of Latina/Hispanic women as compared with other groups (Keller & Fleury, 2006), and research indicates that higher levels of individual social capital are associated with better health outcomes (Cyrus et al., 2015).

It should be noted that the foreign-born participants in our study originated from a number of different countries. While their responses were remarkably similar, probably because they had all experienced plazas and town squares as noted above, we cannot identify those ways in which different countries of origin may have influenced their perceptions of parks. And due to study constraints, we did not explicitly examine whether there were differences in perception between women who originated from rural and urban settings and it did not emerge as a theme in our data.

In conclusion, our findings suggest the need to integrate culturally specific health promoting infrastructures and programs in parks, as well as the importance of addressing safety concerns of diverse urban communities. Future research is needed to investigate how changes in park infrastructure, program activities, and amenities affect physical activity and the health of diverse ethnic groups living in communities burdened by sedentary behaviors and in need of more active living and social integration.

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