Being Mexican: Strengths and Challenges of

Mexican-Origin Adolescents

Krista M. Malott

Villanova University

Abstract

This article provides outcomes of a qualitative inquiry with 20 adolescents of Mexican origin, all of whom have lived in the United States at least two years. Questions addressed the perceived strengths and challenges related to the participants' ethnic heritage. Findings indicated the greatest perceived challenge was discrimination. Strengths were identified as pride in one's heritage and the ability to overcome difficulties and to respond effectively to discrimination. Suggestions for applying findings to school counselor practices are provided.

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Across the nation's schools, Latinos are one of the largest and most rapidly expanding populations, comprising 19%, or nearly one out of five, of the K-12 student population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). As adolescents, Latinos experience multiple environmental stressors. In addition to experiencing lowered educational and achievement expectations, along with racial bias in academic settings (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004), Latino youth have greater rates of teen pregnancy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007) and high school dropout (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003) than all other populations. Considering these stressors, this large and growing population warrants particular attention from school counselors.

Statistics from the 2009 U.S. Census Bureau show that immigrants and their children account for the largest population increase in the country. In regards to foreign born Latinos, Mexican immigrants are the most numerous (n=11.9 million). In addition, they comprise the largest group of foreign born persons overall in this country, equaling approximately one third of the foreign-born population (N=38.1 million; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Foreign-born Mexicans are faced with unique stressors. For instance, language acquisition is a challenge, as approximately 97% of this population speaks a language other than English in the home. Approximately 70% of this population indicated that they speak English less than "very well." In addition, 25%, or one out of four, live in poverty, compared with approximately a 13% poverty rate for both natives and the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Foreign-born youth experience multiple stressors related with immigration, including the severing of ties to friends and families and a loss of coping and financial resources (Hovey, 2000). In addition, they must adapt to a new culture in their new settings (Williams & Butler, 2003), while faced with language barriers, cultural conflicts and the prejudice of others (Hovey, 2000; Krupin, 2001). Foreign born youth have higher dropout rates than their native-born counterparts (22.8%). Factors related to drop out for this population are cited as work demands, schooling difficulties before migration, experiences of racial and ethnic biases, and factors related to poverty (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005).

Native-born Mexicans share many similarities with their first generation, foreign-born counterparts. For instance, both experience high dropout rates and a high participation in the labor force related to low-paying, service or Migrant type jobs (Cornelius, 2006). They possess historical and linguistic similarities. In addition, the two groups share multiple cultural traits. For instance, in a study of predominantly foreign-born and first generation Mexicans (Niemann, Romero, Arredondo, & Rodriguez, 1999), cultural traits identified by all participants as meaningful included commitment to family, a strong work ethic, and the importance of celebrations. Participants in that study also recognized and honored traditional gender roles and hierarchical structures in relationships. Finally, considering that both first generation and foreign-born Mexicans have Mexican parents, both adolescent groups must balance a loyalty to family and Mexican culture, language, and traditions with pressures to conform to diverging peer, school, and work expectations (Holleran & Waller, 2003; Rumbaut, 2005).

Considering the multiple stressors or challenges experienced by individuals of Mexican origins, mental health professionals could offer such a population essential support and services. However, the Latino population overall has shown a tendency to underutilize counseling services (Cabassa, Zayas, & Hansen, 2006), with the lowest rate of utilization being that of Mexican-born individuals (Vega, Kolody, Aguilar-Gaxiola, & Catalano, 1999). In addition, for those who do seek services, there is a higher rate of client attrition than for Whites, predominantly related to language and cultural barriers or culturally irrelevant services (Barrio et al., 2006; Lopez, Bergren, & Painter, 2008; Ruiz, 2002).

As an example, counselors may attempt to apply interventions or theories informed by an Anglo, dominant-culture paradigm, such as focusing on resolving a problem identified as existing within the client, when that issue may actually be part of the system itself (such as problems created by acculturative stress within the family). In addition, Latino clients may possess world views or preferences for indigenous healing practices that the counselor refuses, or is unable, to honor (Comas-Díaz, 2006). Finally, in school settings, school counselors may lack knowledge or cultural awareness regarding effective identity development in relation to Mexican-origin youth. They may be unaware of the importance of addressing youth ethnic identity in promoting strengths specific to Mexican-origin youth (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006).

Ethnic Identity

A major task of adolescence is to solidify a sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). Ethnic identity is one aspect of self identity and can be defined as an affiliation and

sense of pride in one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). Group affiliation is supported

through a shared commitment to a common religion, cultural traits, history and language

(Cohen, 2004). However, ethnic behaviors, such as engagement in ethnic activities or

use of the language, do not necessarily indicate a strong or weak ethnic identity, as

ethnic identity is not necessarily expressed through external behaviors (Phinney & Ong,

2007).

Phinney (1992) cites ethnic identity development as a stage process, whereby

youth begin with a lack of awareness regarding the meaning of their ethnicity. Over time

and through exploration they obtain understanding of, and commitment to, their

ethnicity. Exploration may involve activities such as reading or talking with others about

one's heritage or history, learning about cultural practices, and attending cultural events

(Phinney & Ong, 2007). Research suggests that young people of color often begin an

exploration of ethnicity in early adolescences and often when exposed to groups who

differ from them.

For instance, a longitudinal study by French, Seidman, Allen, and Aber (2006)

found that identity exploration was initiated during a school transition for Latino and

African American students; this happened when they moved from a more ethnically

homogenous middle school to a more integrated high school. The authors posited that

exposure to other groups over a three-year period led to an increase in their group

esteem scores. However, the ethnic identity measure (the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity

Measure,* by Phinney, 1992) applied to students showed that Latinos and African

Americans increased at a greater rate than for White students, who stayed relatively

stable over time in comparison. This suggests ethnicity to be a more salient factor for

individuals of color, and corroborates findings from earlier studies confirming a lack of salience of ethnicity in general for Whites and the importance of it for persons of color (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Tarver, 1988). Experts have asserted this to be true due to the significance of minority status in the eyes of the larger society (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005).

There are many benefits to be gained for Latinos who perceive the positive aspects of their ethnic identities. For instance, embracing positive feelings toward one's ethnic group has been shown to increase youth psychosocial adjustment (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, 2007). Other researchers have positively linked ethnic identity and well-being (Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Ryff, Keyes, & Hughes, 2003). Academically, increased levels of Latino ethnicity have been correlated with positive school adjustment (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001), academic achievement (Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006), and school engagement (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007).

Hence, evidence would suggest the importance of counselors addressing youth ethnic identity, particularly in middle and secondary school settings, where young persons may be initiating the process of ethnic self-exploration. Pride in one's ethnic identity can build resilience against the negative effects of multiple environmental stressors. Increased counselor understanding of how ethnic identity plays a supportive role, and meaningful aspects of youth ethnicity, can increase school counselors' abilities to help such clients embrace and value their identities.

Attending to Latino clientele and their needs requires knowledge of the population, including the uniqueness across Latino subgroups. The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the challenges and strengths Mexican youth

perceive related to being Mexican. The following section describes methodology and the interview process that was used to explore how youth draw on their ethnic characteristics for resiliency in addressing environmental challenges. Findings are then applied to counselors in school settings.

Method

A phenomenological methodology was applied in this study. This tradition entails an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon, in an attempt to identify and describe the general essence of a lived experience shared across individuals (Patton, 1990). Emphasis in this tradition is upon understanding how participants make sense of a phenomenon and how their behavior is influenced by their own understanding (Maxwell, 2005). The uncovering of meaning is accomplished through dialogue with participants, eliciting everyday descriptions regarding the phenomenon studied; in this case, that of making meaning of one's ethnicity.

Participants

The participants (see Table 1) were 20 individuals of Mexican origin, ages 14 to 18 (M=16). Participants resided in a small, mid-Atlantic city with a sizeable Mexican population and school district with a 33% Latino-descent population. Nine participants were male, 11 were female. Participant selection was based on similarities regarding age, language ability (Spanish), ethnicity, parentage (e.g., the youth had to have both parents born in Mexico), and parent work status as service workers, allowing the youth to experience similarities across culture, history, and language. Sixteen participants were born in Mexico, two were born in the States but returned shortly after to Mexico for different time periods, and two were born in the States but had returned regularly to

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym[a]	Age	Origin of Birth	Last Grade	Years in U.S.	Language Preference[b]	Income[c]
Emeril	18	Mexico	1st year college	10	Both	Middle
Frederick	18	Mexico	1st year college	12	Both	Lower Middle
Juan	18	Mexico	11th	14	English	N/A[d]
Diana	17	Mexico	12th	4.75	Both	Middle
Nancy	17	Mexico	11th	4	Both	Lower
David	17	Mexico	11th	6	Both	N/A
Vincent	16	Mexico	11th	2	Both	Lower Middle
Eduardo	16	U.S.	11th	9	Both	N/A
Selma	16	U.S.	10th	16	Both	Lower Middle
Amy	16	Mexico	9th	15	Both	N/A
Pablo	15	Mexico	9th	3	Spanish	N/A
Jose	15	Mexico	9th	5	Spanish	N/A
Victor	15	Mexico	9th	3	Both	N/A
Andrea	15	Mexico	8th	2	Both	N/A
Gina	14	U.S.	9th	13	Both	Lower
Berlinda	14	U.S.	8th	14	Spanish	N/A
Linda	14	Mexico	8th	3.5	Both	N/A
Claudia	14	Mexico	8th	12	Spanish	Lower
Rosetta	14	Mexico	8th	2	Both	N/A
Sarita	14	Mexico	7th	7	Both	N/A

[a]All participant names are pseudonyms. [b]English, Spanish or both. [c]Middle Income: $37,774 - $60,000, lower middle income: $20,035 - $37,774, lower income: below $20,035. [d]Indicates participant did not report.

Mexico. The average number of years of residence in the U.S. was 7.85, ranging from 2 to 16 years.

The majority of participants (n=18) reported an advanced level of Spanish proficiency, and 2 indicated an intermediate level. Language preference for daily use was cited predominantly as both Spanish and English (n=15). Eight individuals reported family income. Of those, 2 were middle income ($37,774 - $60,000), 3 were lower middle income ($20,035 - $37,774), and 3 were lower income (below $20,035). All parents' jobs were reported as labor or service jobs.

Data Collection

Study procedures were approved by the principle investigator's University Institutional Review Board. A target number of 20 participants were selected with the goal of data saturation, or redundancy, in an effort to verify that all possible responses would be explored. Participants were identified and interviewed at a youth community center. They were purposively selected (Polkinghorne, 2005), meeting the following eligibility criteria: ages 14 to 18, and both parents of Mexican descent. An attempt was made to equally represent males and females. The community center's director and employees aided in the recruitment of participants, handing out and collecting consent forms signed by parents.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were selected as an appropriate medium for giving voice to the realistic experiences of adolescents. An interview guide was developed, and questions were built upon prior research regarding ethnicity with Latinos (e.g., Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, & Cota, 1993; Hurtado, Gurin, & Peng,1994; Jones-Correa & Leal, 1996; Malott, 2009). Inquiry explored the adolescents' perceived

challenges and strengths related to their ethnic identities. Those questions were open ended, allowing for additional exploration of responses as they emerged. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish (or bilingually), according to each participant's preference. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, with the average interview lasting 45 minutes. All conversations were audio recorded, following introduction of the researcher and topic and review of the participants' rights. Interviews were completed with a demographic questionnaire and a $10 gift certificate as thanks for contributing.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological data analysis procedure was implemented. Procedures were followed according to suggestions by Morrissette (1999). Audio tapes were transcribed verbatim by the author and two graduate students. The recordings were checked against transcriptions in various sections, to verify transcription accuracy. The written interviews were then reviewed, along with field notes, to achieve an overall impression of the interview experience and to cross check findings (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

A team of two assistant professors and one graduate and one undergraduate student assisted in analyzing the data. Because of the differing levels of knowledge across the team regarding analytic procedures, the principle author devoted several meetings to informing members regarding the phenomenological data analysis process. During training, to increase familiarity with one another's assessment of the data, team members identified thematic codes for several pages of data, and codes were compared and contrasted and explanation for code selection was shared.

The subsequent analysis process required that each member review all interview transcripts, to highlight meaningful or thematic segments and assign each segment a code that reflected the essence of the statement. A within-person analysis was also completed by each member, compiling a summary of each participant's responses and the themes identified within each transcript. Throughout the process, codes were initially allowed to emerge with each reviewer and terminology was defined. Team members met multiple times to review thematic findings within and across transcripts, comparing findings and working to achieve consistency across team members.

Redundancy (e.g., repetition) of thematic findings emerged at the fifth transcript and another five transcripts were analyzed to verify redundancy. The research team then deemed it appropriate to relegate analysis of the final 10 transcripts to the principal investigator using codes identified by the team. The final step entailed combining similar codes and identifying those found in half or more of the total interviews. Those codes were then selected for publication.

Efforts to Establish Trustworthiness

Efforts to establish trustworthiness are described with qualitative language as defined by Morrow (2005). Confirmability (similar to objectivity, in quantitative research) was achieved in this study through attending to the audit trail, which entailed a detailed account of the research process and activities. In addition, researchers sought to bracket, or set aside, personal assumptions or biases. The research team discussed biases and challenged one another regarding their influence on the analysis process.

Dependability (similar to reliability) was achieved through use of an audit trail in recording the research process, including transcripts, records of communication with

participants and team members, and records of emerging themes and influences upon data collection and analysis (Morrow, 2005). Credibility (related to internal validity) was established through development of researcher reflexivity through field notes, immersion in the data, and use of personal quotations to provide a rich description of participants' experiences. Additionally, participant checks were implemented through use of email, whereby each participant was sent a copy of their typed interview and a summary of the interview that included identified themes. Those who provided feedback largely indicated that they found the summaries and thematic findings accurate. Changes were made for only one participant indicating who noted a misinterpretation of her interview, whereby she clarified level of importance for her values according to religion and family (e.g., she perceived that we had interpreted those values as more important to her than they actually were).

Results

Themes identified (Table 2) as significant were those found in half or more of the transcripts and in relation to the research questions regarding perceived strengths and challenges of being Mexican. Themes related to challenges were cited as *discrimination* or related stereotypes. Themes entailing strengths were *pride* in one's ethnicity and *working hard to overcome difficulties*, and participants' *responses* to discriminatory experiences.

Challenges

Participants cited a total of eight different challenges related to their ethnicities, including challenges related to poverty, immigration status (or a lack of), and the conflict between Latino subgroups (e.g., between those that had been in the States for several

Table 2

Thematic Findings and Representative Quotes

Second Order Theme	First Order Theme	Representative Statements
Challenges	Discrimination	"Just because you're Mexican, [they assume] you're undocumented … taking away jobs … you're one of those, like, gangster people … who steal … who get high … you're gonna drop out … you're gonna be pregnant."
Strengths	Pride	"I'm proud of being Mexican because I learned my heritage and I know my history." "I like myself a lot because I'm Mexican." "The Mexican people are my family and I feel proud to be a part of them."
	Working Hard to Overcome Difficulties	"It takes a lot of courage to come to another country with no English, with nothing behind you, no money." "[My dad] worked hard to provide us with what we have now and I mean, it's just overcoming struggle."
	Responses [to Discrimination]	"[I] just ignore it" "I will fight for it" "When someone looks down on me, I try harder to make my way up."

generation versus those closer to their immigration roots). However, the single response made by over 50% of the respondents was experiences of discrimination. As one participant asserted, "there is a lot of racism out there." Experiences with discrimination could be summarized, using the participants' descriptions, as the prejudiced beliefs or actions of others based on stereotypes regarding Mexicans. One youth described it as, "people putting you down, trying to make you feel bad, making you feel less than they are."

Although the youth cited experiences of prejudice from other Latinos (such as Puerto Ricans), most discriminatory actions came from Whites. Prejudiced individuals were found in school, health, and community settings. Those individuals were adult professionals (e.g., teachers, nurses, counselors, sales clerks, and policeman) and peers. Treatment in stores was mentioned by several participants, with one participant explaining that, "you never know if you are going to end up going to a store and people will just flat out straight be the rudest people to you, just because of the color of your skin."

The majority of participants believed that stereotypes regarding Mexicans acted as the impetus for the majority of discriminatory incidents experienced. A young teen described this as, "judging a book by the cover without opening it," and another expressed his frustration, stating, "just because somebody does something doesn't mean that we are all like that." Various stereotypes were noted by one participant and echoed by multiple others, including the belief that, "just because you're Mexican, you're undocumented … taking away the jobs … you're one of those, like, gangster people … who steal … who get high … you're gonna drop out … you're gonna be pregnant."

Another participant cited a stereotype related to language proficiency, saying, "they think that I don't speak English … this happened yesterday, they started talking to me like I didn't know English." Several males discussed experiencing profiling by the police, as a result of stereotyping. They described this as a singling out by police and subsequent hassling, when driving or walking in public. Many of the participants noted a shared experience of oppression or mistreatment with African Americans. As one youth stated, "we're not seen like Americans … we are [seen] like the Afro-Americans, like criminals."

The participants also believed that others viewed them as less capable or intelligent as their Anglo peers. One youth described her reaction to this stereotype, saying, "I was very hurt because people … thought I was not good enough or that I couldn't do it." That stereotype manifested itself in the schools as lowered academic expectations by teachers or counselors. One teen explained of the teachers, "They all expect you to do bad in classes and they don't pay attention to you because they all think you're going to fail anyway."

One teen described moving to a new school district and immediately being placed into a class for students with lower academic skills. He explained, "In this school district, not many of my type made it very far, sadly … it took a while to get back on par, and I [still] don't think I'm on par." In another instance, a school counselor advised a youth who hoped to attend a Big-Ten university that he "'should look more at the smaller schools.'" He perceived that the school counselor believed he would fail academically because he was Mexican. However, he had been prepared for such advice, and he eventually went on to a Big-Ten university. He explained, "when I walked out of there …

I was laughing because I knew … she was going to tell me that, because it was something that they told my sister, also."

Strengths

Participants cited a total of ten different strengths related to their ethnicities, including the perception that being bilingual and bicultural increased career options and made them unique, in a positive way, in the eyes of others. However, only three strengths were cited by 50% or more of the adolescents. These included pride, working *hard to overcome difficulties*, and *responses* to discrimination.

Pride. Pride in one's Mexican traits was the most frequently noted strength. Representative comments of this theme included, "I'm proud of saying that I'm Mexican," "I like myself a lot because I'm Mexican," and "I'm proud of myself being from there [Mexico]." Pride was related to multiple aspects of Mexican traits, including pride regarding one's appearance, culture, and history. As one youth explained, "I am proud of being a Mexican because I learned my heritage and I know my history." In turn, she eventually joined a Mexican dance troupe as an expression of that pride. Pride was also reflected in the participants' experiences of solidarity with the Mexican people in general. As one youth explained, "in Mexico, we are all like family," and another: "ellos [Mexicans] son mi familia y me siento orgullo de ser parte de ellos," (the Mexican people are my family and I feel pride to be a part of them).

Friends, mentors, and family inspired or modeled pride for the adolescents. As one teen explained of her mentor, a professional in the community, "she would introduce herself … and [say] 'I am Mexican American.' She said it with such pride. I wanted to be proud of being a Mexican too." Others cited family members as instilling

pride in them. For instance, one teen proudly explained that he learned his many traditions, "from grandfathers and all the family … the different cantos [Mexican songs] in Mexico, all the parties … our traditions, they're like, all together, with family." This theme of pride was connected to the following theme of *working hard to overcome difficulties*, whereby pride in one's ethnicity provided inspiration in overcoming adversity.

Working hard to overcome difficulties. Participants were particularly proud that they themselves, family members, and other Mexicans had overcome multiple hardships, to *seguir adelante* (get ahead or achieve). They frequently described Mexicans as being "strong," as a result of facing and overcoming challenges, and this strength was described by several participants as the will to "never give up." Participant belief in the strength and tenacity of fellow Mexicans inspired confidence in overcoming their own hardships

Hardships were frequently related to immigration. As one participant who struggled to overcome language barriers in school explained, "I had to learn a language while I was learning … and that gave me a challenge, so when I completed the challenge I [had] learned about myself it made me a strong person." Another stated:

When I came here [U.S.], I became really proud of my culture, Mexican. Because I see how much they work, how hard they work … they're doing this and that and the next generation, my generation, here we are going to college and we're making something out of ourselves, we're doing something good and it just makes me really proud.

An additional hardship participants cited facing was poverty. As one youth explained of himself and his family, "it takes a lot of courage to come to another country

… with nothing behind you, with no money." Similarly, another youth recognized his parents' sacrifices and struggles in overcoming poverty:

> The part that I'm from, I mean, Mexico, there's … really poor areas … and my dad had four kids … so there was no way for him to stay there. I mean, he worked hard to provide us with what we have now and I mean, it's just overcoming struggle and that's what I'm proud of.

Several youth discussed facing peer pressure, particularly in relation to joining gangs. One youth described using pride in his identity as a tool for resistance. When faced with peers taking drugs or joining gangs, he explained, "that is the moment that I say 'I'm Mexican and can overcome this.'"

Youth described how sacrifices by parents and their own hard work inspired them to seek educational achievement. For instance, one youth explained that her decision to go to college and "get a really good job" was based on the challenges that her mother described facing in Mexico and then in the U.S. She stated that her mother, "told me … how it's hard to get a job over there, and hard to get food to feed your families … she told me about her lifestyle, how it was over there and how it was here." Another youth explained, "my parents told me that they are bringing me to the United States just to have a better life, to have a better education, to be something when I grow up." In turn, he chose a future career in medicine, stating that it was important for him to "be smart or make my parents proud of me."

Responses. Participants were quick to describe ways they responded to discriminatory incidents or behaviors of others. Many responses were not necessarily visible to others, as several participants cited making conscientious decisions to, "just

ignore it … I am not going to let it put me down." They explained that this decision was based on advice from family members. Similarly, several participants dismissed the offender, one stating, "I'm not going to let it bug me … there's nothing I can do to change what they think or change what they believe." Reactions of anger and frustration were common. However, several participants also cited an increase in ethnic pride as a positive response to discriminatory events. As one individual explained, "seeing that other people don't accept you … it just made me think more and more about [being Mexican] and eventually just to be even prouder."

Other responses to discrimination were action-oriented in nature. As one participant stated, "there are times when I will fight for it," and "when someone looks down on me, I try harder to make my way up. I like to work hard." In the case of being perceived as a monolingual Spanish speaker, one youth explained, "I talk to them all sophisticated in English." With peers, the adolescents described confronting and challenging prejudiced comments or acts. When faced with adults with lowered expectations, youth felt compelled to achieve more, academically, in an effort to disprove stereotypes regarding their abilities. For instance, one adolescent who was told to "go back to Mexico" decided, "I don't want to hear more people telling me that. It was making me feel strong to keep studying, to keep studying my English class or my other classes." Others got involved in the community, to combat stereotypes. One young woman explained:

> It is just hard sometimes when people think that you are like everyone else and that the whole Hispanic community is just trash and that is why … we started

painting over graffiti, because we wanted to let them, the people in this

community, know that there are people that care about the community.

Another participant explained how he "works" with the individual person

perceived as prejudiced; "when I sense prejudices I try to let them know that I'm a

person first and then a Mexican is a background thing … I extend myself more as a

person … just become more eloquent."

Discussion

This study attempted to further understanding of Mexican-origin youth through

examining their perceived strengths and challenges of being Mexican. Participants in

this study identified distinct challenges and strengths related to their Mexican identities.

An experience of discrimination emerged as a primary challenge. In turn, discrimination

was often addressed with what the youth cited as their strengths—their tenacity or

ability to overcome difficulties and pride in their heritage, which allowed them to refute

or ignore offensive behaviors from others. The following are suggestions regarding

ways school counselors can apply the study's findings in facilitating the healthy identity

development of Mexican-origin youth.

Strengths: Pride and Working Hard to Overcome Difficulties

The study's participants indicated that their abilities to overcome difficulties

allowed them to face many environmental stressors, including challenges related to

peer pressure, poverty and acculturation. In addition, perceptions of fellow Mexicans as

strong enough to overcome difficulties inspired confidence in the adolescents for facing

their own challenges. Hence, exploration of Mexican-origin adolescents' perceptions of

their group's collective strengths in overcoming may be one way school counselors can

increase youth positive association with that group. In turn, counselors may use discussion of perceived group strengths as a segue for exploration of the youth's personal strengths.

Exploration of personal strengths in relation to the collective group's ability to overcome can be explored in multiple ways, including through individual and group counseling or classroom guidance. The topic could be addressed through discussion, whereby the counselor could promote exploration with specific questions such as "What strengths allow those Mexican or Mexican-American friends or family members to persevere or overcome difficulties?" "Who has inspired you in your family and why?" or "Who are your role models in facing adversity, from the Mexican or Mexican-American community?" Such inquiry could also be made creatively, through use of (ethnic specific) magazines or crafts in constructing a representation (e.g., mask or collage) of the strengths of the Mexican people.

Such a topic could also be addressed in a psychoeducational format. For instance, counselors could present historical Mexican-American figures that have overcome difficulties, including local Latinos, in group or classroom setting. Such didactic material could be used as a platform for launching discussion or exploration of the strengths of same-ethnic role models. In turn, the counselor can focus on ways the youth are inspired and affected personally by the successes of others. Suggested questions include, "What does it mean to you, to realize those role models were able to overcome such difficulties?" or "How does this affect your confidence in your own ability to overcome and thrive?" When working specifically with at-risk behaviors or problem solving, counselors can ask the youth to draw from those strengths. Examples of

questions are, "How does your survival strengths help you in dealing with your problem?" or "How does being strong help you deal with your problem? What does your strength tell you to do?"

Another strength reflected by participants was pride in one's ethnicity and related traits (e.g., Mexican history, culture, or traditions). Ethnic pride can act as a buffer to environmental stressors and can foster a sense of group belonging (Phinney & Ong, 2007). School counselors can strive to engender youth pride in identity through encouraging membership in community or school organizations or groups that foster understanding of one's ethnicity (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). Examples might include a culture club, ethnic-specific dance troupes, or after-school programs that include ethnic celebrations or traditions. In addition, school counselors can educate the school's teachers to initiate discussion that include the following: ethnic pride, again with individual or group counseling or within the classroom. Discussion questions could include, "What about being Mexican makes you proud?" "What are the traits of the Mexican culture, traditions, or history that are unique?" "What do you want others to know about people with Mexican roots?" Teachers could include members of other ethnic groups in such a discussion, demonstrating that (virtually) all individuals in the U.S. come from different origins and possess an immigration history.

Specific discussion topics related to ethnic pride that the counselor can introduce include self-labeling, cultural values, traditions, and norms (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Malott, Alessandria, Kirkpatrick, & Carandang, 2009; Quintana, 2007). Reading material could be introduced addressing topics of ethnic identity, pride, and discrimination (Malott et al., 2009). In extending pride to coping behaviors or skills, counselors could

ask, "What about those traits (e.g., traditions or language skills) would help you address your problem?" or "Which traits can you draw upon to help you address your problem?"

Incorporating student culture into schools has been shown as one way to increase youth sense of belonging and commitment (Gibson & Bijínez, 2002). Hence, the school counselor can simultaneously foster youth ethnic pride while providing a venue for sharing culture within the school setting. Examples of creative expressions of ethnic pride include posters or decorations with art or information regarding Mexican and Mexican-American culture or history, or holding celebrations or demonstrations of certain traditions (e.g., Mexican dancing). School counselors could encourage teachers to allow student incorporation of their culture into the classroom or lesson plans. Students could teach peers from other ethnic groups about what makes them proud about their culture (Malott, 2009).

Challenges: Discrimination

This study's finding corroborates prior research outcomes indicating that a strong ethnic identity can facilitate youth coping responses to culturally-related stressors (Phinney, 2003; Umaña-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, Garcia, & Gonzales-Backen, 2008). Indeed, in response to discriminatory-related stressors, researchers have found that those with advanced ethnic identity levels are more likely to use recommended active coping techniques (Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2008). However, regarding discrimination, research supports more active coping responses over others (Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Sue et al., 2008). It is imperative that school counselors are able and willing to facilitate effective discussions and practices with students regarding refuting discrimination.

Experts have cited the importance of addressing experiences of discrimination with students on an individual basis, providing a safe place for students to voice experiences of oppression and strengthening their coping mechanisms (Zayas, 2001). School counselors must encourage students to accurately attribute discrimination to stereotypes, as opposed to allowing students to internalize events as personal attacks (Crocker & Major, 1989). Counselors can also focus upon increasing student self esteem, as a barrier against racism (Mak & Nesdale, 2001), as well as students' critical consciousness, whereby they can increase student understanding of racism as a historical and cultural phenomenon, rather than something to be taken personally (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1997).

Counselors can also engage students in skill building activities regarding responding to racism. An empirically supported intervention addressing discrimination involves group or classroom activities that educate students about the effects of discrimination and stereotypes (Plous, 2000). Plous described a role play exercise whereby students practice confronting prejudice. Students can act as a speaker, responder, or coach. The speaker is given a script regarding discriminatory or biased comments, for which the responder then must reply. Discriminatory incidents actually experienced by students in that setting could be elicited and applied to create the script (Thomas, 2006). After acting out and responding to an incident, the coach (all additional students can act as coaches) then discuss the effectiveness of the response, with suggested alternative responses. Roles should then be rotated, so that all persons have the experience of being in each role.

Plous (2000) reported what his university students rated as effective responses to discriminatory comments. First, the respondent should be approached with respect, as opposed to self-righteousness, the latter of which would only serve to provoke defensive responses. Second, the respondent could address the prejudiced comment with a question, such as "Why do you say that?" and "What makes you feel that way about persons in that group?" as opposed to a statement. Fisher and Ury (1983) have asserted that statements (e.g., "that was pretty racist") are more easily refuted or met with resistance, as opposed to use of questions. Finally, the sharing of one's feelings or reactions is equally difficult to refute. For instance, the responder could explain that the comment "makes me uncomfortable" or "I feel really upset hearing you say that."

Beyond practicing responding to discriminatory events, research supports promotion of other active coping responses to discrimination. For instance, a study by Phinney and Chavira (1995) found that, in addition to addressing discrimination with the perpetrator directly, youth who used additional proactive coping styles also experienced higher self esteem than those who deferred to verbal retorts. These styles included seeking to disprove the stereotypical beliefs and affirming the self through use of positive self messages. Hence, school counselors can impart these techniques to students individually, in groups, or in the classroom. This includes the use of role play, to promote practice of application of these techniques.

Finally, with all of these suggested activities, school counselors should also include dominant culture, White students. Research cites the importance of social supports for coping with discrimination (Terry, Rawle, & Callan, 1995), and this includes supportive friendships with White students (Mak & Nesdale, 2001). In addition,

combining various ethnic groups will hopefully increase group relations. Experts have suggested that building positive relations across groups involved work toward common goals (an absence of competitive activities), sharing personal facts (including group stereotypes), and creating deeper connections, such as friendships or increasing empathy or perspective-taking (Miller, 2002; Pettigrew; 1998; Vera, Buhin, & Shin, 2006).

Adult Discrimination: Advocacy and Response

Although it is essential to encourage the development of student skills in responding to discrimination, discrimination remains a social injustice with potentially severe and long-term effects (Clark & Gochett, 2006; Moradi & Risco, 2006) that calls for broader, or systemic, interventions by counselors (Vera et al., 2006). Empirical evidence suggests that, even within schools that boast strong multicultural and anti-racist policies, discrimination happens. It often go unrecognized by the school staff, who may be unaware of discrimination due to students' reluctance to report events (Donald, Gosling, & Hamilton, 2004; Woolfson, Harker, & Lowe, 2004). Hence, it is imperative that school counselors advocate for school-wide anti-racist policies that provide student confidentially when disclosing harmful events.

Researchers have also asserted the need for adults to respond (as opposed to dismiss) incidents they themselves may perceive as innocuous, such as name calling (Baker, Varma, & Tanaka, 2001). For instance, one study showing that adults' (in this case, parents') active coping responses to discrimination (e.g., confronting the perpetrator or acting on the discriminatory incident) lowered youth anxiety and depression rates (Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2004). D'Andrea and Daniels (2007)

suggested school counselors act as consultants with school teachers, staff, and administrators, advising ways they can to respond to racial conflicts.

Finally, counselors could educate teachers and administrators regarding their own unconscious discriminatory acts or beliefs. Research cites these incidents as unequal or unfair treatment of students of color. These include greater punitive treatment, lowered teaching expectations and differential teacher treatment (Fennelly, Mulkeen, & Giusti, 1998; Monroe, 2005), and disproportionate placement into special education services (Noguera, 2005). Experts posit that a link exists between such negative schooling experiences for youth of color and poor academic performance (Monroe, 2005), delinquency, and recidivism (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Voelkl, Welte, & Wieczorek, 1999).

Conclusion

Participants' perceived challenges and related to Mexican ethnicity provide direction for school counselors in supporting healthy youth development. Outcomes reflect the significance of encouraging youth self-exploration as a means of increasing counselor knowledge and understanding of the population. In turn, exploration can illuminate ethnic-related strengths that can be used by school counselors, engendering culturally relevant counseling interventions in the school setting.

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Author Note

Krista M. Malott, Department of Education and Human Services, Villanova University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Krista Malott, Villanova University, 800 Lancaster, Department of Education and Human Services, SAC 302, Villanova, PA, 19085. Email: krista.malott@villanova.edu.