

# Understanding the Influence of Sexual Risk Taking, Ethnic Identity, and Family and Peer Support on School Importance Among Hispanic Adolescents

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## Abstract

Despite the broader academic gains experienced by Hispanic students, who represent the largest minority group in the United States, they remain the least educated of all major ethnic groups, and our understanding of their academic needs and strengths remains woefully inadequate. Therefore, this study examined the risk (e.g., sexual risk taking) and protective factors (e.g., family support, supportive peer networks, and ethnic identity) associated with school importance among Hispanic teens ( $N = 587$ ) residing in a high-risk, resource poor urban community and the ways in which these relationships vary between adolescent males (46.5%) and adolescent females (53.5%). Schools that are able to harness the numerous assets embedded within the Hispanic community are well positioned to create learning environments that are encouraging, are culturally responsive, and can potentially reduce risk involvement that may interfere with valuing the role of school importance. Implications for school-based personnel are discussed.

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school importance, Hispanic adolescents, sexual risk, ethnic identity, family support, positive peer networks

**Introduction**

Hispanic youth and their families typically have similar educational aspirations as non-Hispanic Whites (Nitardy, Duke, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2015). Yet, their pathways to educational success are often riddled with profound and significant barriers (Benner & Wang, 2014). For example, many Hispanic students' possess disproportionately fewer economic and social resources, which are more consistently and readily available to their non-minority counterparts throughout their educational careers (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Schools are also often simultaneously unable to compensate for these deficits. As a result, many Hispanic students experience complex relationships with their schools resulting in compromised academic achievement and weakened educational connections (Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). According to Ruiz (2009), these issues are often further compounded by the risk factors associated with academic underachievement among Hispanics, including minority status, discriminatory experiences, institutional barriers at school, increased probability of placement in special education and remedial tracks, and limited English language proficiency.

The existing literature on school outcomes among Hispanic youth also delineates disproportionately negative consequences such as school suspensions, high dropout rates, and low levels of college completion (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). These identified constraints are often linked to increased feelings of isolation and alienation among Hispanic students from their school community. Consequently, the possibility of positive school bonding can become undermined (Niehaus, Irvin, & Rogelberg, 2016; Voelkl, 1997). Because school failure has been associated with engaging in problem behaviors such as sexual risk taking and substance abuse (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014; Voelkl, 1997), it becomes imperative to develop an understanding of the various issues that may obstruct or serve to promote the importance of school among Hispanic youth.

Regardless of the serious threats to the well-being of Hispanic students who are struggling in school, some academic gains have been observed among Hispanic adolescents. For instance, more Hispanics than ever before have a high school diploma and record numbers are enrolling in postsecondary education (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). However, gender variations have been observed among Hispanic adolescents in regard to school achievement. For example, Hispanic females tend to finish high school more frequently

than Hispanic males (Niehaus et al., 2016). Hispanic females are also more likely to have higher grade point averages, have greater aspirations, spend more hours completing their homework, have a more positive rating of their school climate, and perceive more social support than Hispanic male students (Garcia-Reid, Peterson, & Reid, 2015). Yet, despite the broader academic gains experienced by Hispanic students, who represent the largest minority group in the United States, they remain the least educated of all major ethnic groups, and our understanding of their academic needs and strengths remains woefully inadequate. Therefore, this study aims to examine the risk (i.e., sexual risk taking) and protective factors (e.g., family support, supportive peer networks, and ethnic identity) associated with school importance among Hispanic teens and the ways in which these relationships vary between adolescent males and females.

### *Sexual Risk Taking*

Hispanic adolescents' sexual debut tends to be earlier than non-Hispanic White adolescents' and they are less likely to use condoms consistently resulting in heightened risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and higher rates of unintentional pregnancy (Morales-Alemán & Scarinci, 2016). Interestingly, results from the Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance Survey (YRBSS) estimate that nearly half of all Hispanic high school students who completed the survey report having had sexual intercourse; while approximately 55% reported using condoms, only 15% of Hispanic females reported using birth control pills (Kann et al., 2016). Although individuals aged 15 to 24 years account for approximately 25% of the sexually active population in the United States, they comprise almost half of all new STIs each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013). Among Hispanic youth, the relationship between sexual risk taking and STIs is markedly higher when compared with non-Hispanic Whites (Deardorff, Tschann, Flores, & Ozer, 2010). For instance, in 2014, gonorrhea and syphilis rates among Hispanic adolescents was found to be more than double that of non-Hispanic adolescents and the rate of chlamydia was nearly 3 times higher than among non-minority youth (CDC, 2013). Unfortunately, there is still a perception among adolescents that they are at a low risk for acquiring an STI or other potentially more fatal STIs such as HIV/AIDS even though many are engaging in overtly negative health-compromising behaviors (Kerr et al., 2014; Stueve & Donnell, 2005).

Gender considerations are critical when examining Hispanic adolescents' sexual behaviors. Gender variations in sexual involvement indicate that Hispanic adolescent males are more likely to have had an earlier sexual debut

and a greater number of sexual partners than Hispanic adolescent females. However, Hispanic teen girls exhibit a larger increase in sexual risk throughout adolescence compared with Hispanic adolescent males (Guarini, Marks, Patton, & Garcia-Coll, 2013).

Elkington, Bauermeister, and Zimmerman (2011) found that more than half of the undiagnosed HIV cases were among teens and young adults ages 13 to 24, with a disproportionate number of new infections being identified among Hispanic (20%) adolescents. While the number of new infection has dropped from 130,000 in the 1990s to approximately 50,000 cases annually in 2012, young people, 13 to 24 years of age, accounted for 21% of the 50,000 newly diagnosed cases (Office of National AIDS Policy, 2015; Reid, Lardier, Garcia-Reid, & Yu, 2016). Minority youth, in particular, are at heightened risk for contracting the virus, which is evidenced by Hispanic youth accounting for nearly 25% of all new HIV cases (CDC, 2016).

Research has demonstrated that teens who prematurely assume adult roles are more likely to disengage and subsequently dropout of school compared with their counterparts who retain only adolescent roles. For instance, among girls, teen pregnancy and motherhood are commonly associated with dropping out from high school (Mollborn, 2010). While adolescent pregnancy and birth rates have significantly declined during the last 15 years in the United States (Santelli & Melnikas, 2010), Hispanic adolescent females have maintained higher birth rates than Black and White teens since the mid-1990s. According to Minnis et al. (2013), several factors have been associated with adolescent childbearing among Hispanic teens, such as limited access to contraceptives, social and cultural norms regarding teen childbearing, and lack of parent/family support. These risk indicators have also continued to contribute to negative school outcomes (Karoly, Callahan, Schmiede, Ewing, & Feldstein Ewing, 2016). However, programs that effectively decrease school dropout and improve attachment to school, school performance, and educational and career aspirations are more likely to either delay sex, increase condom use, or decrease pregnancy and childbearing (Kirby, 2002).

Risky sexual behavior in adolescence is consistently related to poorer outcomes in areas such as health and education (e.g., Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010; Scott et al., 2011; Tortolero et al., 2010). For example, among teens who have negative relationships with their schools, increases in sexual risk taking have been observed; however, investing in school, school involvement, and attachment to school have been associated with delayed initiation of sex and reduced rates of pregnancy and childbearing (Leve, Kerr, & Harold, 2013; McNeely & Falci, 2004). Social support provided by positive peer groups and engaged families can also provide a buffering effect against sexual risk taking and increase school connections among Hispanic adolescent males and females.

## *Positive Peer Networks*

Because adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer influences, peer groups provide important socializing experience that can pose great reward (Choukas-Bradley, Giletta, Cohen, & Prinstein, 2015). Positive peer influences can offer vital emotional and practical support needed to manage health concerns and deter youth from engaging in health-compromising behaviors (Boothroyd & Fisher, 2010). These positive peer influences can also serve as a protective buffer for teens residing in high-risk, urban communities. In regard to academic outcomes, the extant literature indicates that particularly during adolescence, the influence of peer networks can serve to either encourage or dampen school attitudes or behaviors associated with school achievement (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013). These relationships have been found to deepen over time and have been linked to fluctuations in individual educational goals and outcomes (e.g., Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003; Riegle-Crumb, Farkas, & Muller, 2006). Evidence suggests that once peer groups are established, they become further crystalized and begin to look more alike over time (Syed & Juan, 2012). These same students tend to select peers who demonstrate similar levels of academic achievement and school engagement (Lynch et al., 2013). Crosnoe et al. (2003) found that peer support can increase academic achievement through elevated levels of motivation, promote participation in academically related activities, and produce an overall increase in the perception of school as a priority in the adolescent's life.

## *Family Support*

Families perform a significant function in the social and emotional development of Hispanic adolescents. Regardless of level of acculturation, Hispanics of various national backgrounds tend to be more filial than non-Hispanic Whites (Calzada, Tamis-LeMonda, & Yoshikawa, 2012; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2013). Prior studies have demonstrated the invaluable contribution of social support networks in the lives of Hispanic teens (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2009). Perceived social and emotional support provided by parents (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004), and family cohesion (Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddle, 2006; Cupito, Stein, & Gonzalez, 2015) have been related positively to feelings of competence, a sense of relatedness to peers, academic effort, school engagement, higher grades, fewer absences, and improved graduation rates. Family involvement in their children's education has also been shown to be a better predictor of educational success than family income or parent's education level (Carolan & Lardier, in press; Carolan & Wasserman, 2015). Such supportive

relationships are critical for at-risk students who may feel overwhelmed by academic or personal difficulties (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005).

### *Ethnic Identity*

Ethnic identity has been defined as a critical aspect of a person's self-concept that develops from the value and emotional significance related to the connection to one's own heritage (Tajfel, 1981). This interaction between one's own ethnic identity and that of others is believed to be particularly important for the development of a positive ethnic identification among minority groups. When ethnic identity is "achieved," this corresponds to acceptance and internalization of one's ethnic identity (Phinney, 1989), which often renders positive outcomes in multiple spheres of influence including self, home, school, and community (Phinney, 1989; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor, Quintana et al., 2014). This developmental process provides individuals with the cultural capital to view their ethnic group positively particularly when confronted by prejudice and discrimination, therefore promoting a positive, secure, and stable self-concept, and the resilience to achieve one's goals (Edwards & Romero, 2008).

For Hispanic youth, the link between ethnic identity and school outcomes is complex and deeply entrenched in contextual and social influences. While investigations have found that poverty and, by extension, daily hassles and discrimination weakened academic achievement particularly among individuals who reported fragile ethnic identity (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, 2007), a strong sense of ethnic identity combined with family support and positive peer influences could offset risk and insulate Hispanic adolescents from the threats that may interfere with their academic performance. Hence, ethnic identity is a particularly salient developmental experience for Hispanic youth, which can augment youth's life futures.

In the present study, a series of multiple regression models were conducted to assess the effect that sexual risk behavior, family support, participating in positive peer networks, and ethnic identity had on school importance between Hispanic adolescent males and Hispanic adolescent females. Using a risk and protective framework, several constructs provided a contextual lens for examining our outcome variable. The risk variables consisted of sexual risk taking and the protective variables included ethnic identity, family support, and peer support networks. More importantly, we were interested in the buffering effect of ethnic identity between Hispanic males and females. Understanding the subtle interplay of these relationships allows for the design and effective implementation of robust interventions.

## Method

### Sample

Data were collected as part of a Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) Minority AIDS Initiative (MAI) using the Cohort 7 Youth Questionnaire within a northeastern New Jersey urban community. This outcome survey was designed by CSAP to help prevention initiatives learn more about how to keep young people from using drugs and from becoming infected with HIV. All federal grantees were required to administer this outcome survey to their program participants as part of a national cross-site evaluation of all MAI-funded programs across the United States. The survey was divided into three primary sections: (a) facts about you, (b) attitudes and knowledge, and (c) behavior and relationships. Study participants were recruited through convenience sampling methods from four high schools and five summer camp programs in this high-risk, resource poor urban community located in northern New Jersey. Adolescents who returned signed parental informed consent and student assent forms were eligible to participate in survey. Study participants had 50 min to complete the self-administered questionnaire, in English, that assessed 11 variables including sexual risk behaviors, ethnic identity, marijuana disapproval, family support, participation in positive peer networks, and school importance. With some of the more sensitive questions, methodological response bias is an inherent issue, as some students may either over- or underreport certain behaviors (Williams & Nowatzki, 2005). Researchers have, however, emphasized that adolescents' perceptions are the best indicators of their own lived experiences and that reports of sexual risk behavior and similar problem behaviors have a degree of validity (Williams & Nowatzki, 2005).

The original sample ( $N = 924$ ) was largely Hispanic (67.9%), with the next largest demographic group identifying as African American/Black (30.6%). For the present study, the sample was delimited to those students identifying as Hispanic ( $N = 587$ ). A nearly equal distribution of males (46.5%) and females (53.5%) were present from ninth through 12th grades. Approximately, 39% were between 13 and 15 years of age and 61% were between 15 and 18 years of age.

### Measures

As part of the CSAP MAI grant initiative, the study administered the National Minority SA/HIV Prevention Initiative Cohort 7 Youth Questionnaire. This outcomes-based measure was designed by CSAP to help prevention initiatives learn about how to keep youth safe from drugs, alcohol, and becoming infected

**Table 1.** Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics for Main Study Variables between Hispanic Males ( $N = 273$ ) and Females ( $N = 314$ ).

	1	2	3	4	5
1. School importance	—	-.29**	.38**	.17**	.20*
2. Sexual risk behavior	-.25**	—	.02	-.38**	.03
3. Family support	.31*	-.17**	—	.01	.18**
4. Participation in positive peer networks	.20**	-.25**	.17**	—	.02
5. Ethnic identity	.25**	.11*	.12*	-.02	—
Skew	-.59	.57	-.04	-.83	-.27
Kurtosis	.32	.32	-.86	.64	.39
$M$ ( $SD$ )	26.39 (4.26)	9.95 (2.21)	17.49 (4.55)	47.26 (5.95)	15.68 (3.25)
Cronbach's $\alpha$	.70	.73	.84	.73	.80

Note. Males upper quadrant and females lower quadrant.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

with HIV. The survey included a variety of questions related to 30-day substance use, individual perception of drug and alcohol use, access to substances, HIV knowledge and testing behavior, exposure to prevention information, and others. Federal grantees were required to administer this survey to program participants, as the tool provides CSAP and grantees the opportunity to compare participants across grant sites. The present study focused on a subset of questions associated with sexual risk behaviors, ethnic identity, marijuana disapproval, family support, participation in positive peer networks, and school importance. Descriptive statistics, associated alpha levels (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ), and correlations for all variables are found in Table 1.

### Criterion Measure

**School importance.** School importance was assessed using a nine-item measure that asked students to first self-report their grades, providing choices that ranged from *mostly F's* (1) to *mostly A's* (5). Participants then responded to eight additional questions that assessed perceived school importance (sample item: how important do you think things you are learning in school are going to be for your later life?) using a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *very important* (5) to *not at all important* (1). Responses were summed (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ) to reflect higher composite scores of school importance. Students identified moderate rates of school importance ( $M = 26.39$ ;  $SD = 4.26$ ) based on a minimum score of 9 and maximum score of 41.

## Predictor Measures

**Sexual risk behavior.** The sexual risk behavior construct consisted of 12 items to determine the level of risky sexual behavior among surveyed youth (sample item: In the last 30 days, did you or your boyfriend/girlfriend talk about using condoms?). Items were measured using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (4). Responses were summed (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ) to reflect higher levels of risky sexual behavior. Students reported moderate levels of sexual risk taking behaviors ( $M = 9.95$ ;  $SD = 2.21$ ), based on a minimum score of 9 and maximum of 14.

**Family support.** Family support consisted of eight questions that assessed the level of family support and cohesion (sample items: Members of my family ask each other for help? Members of my family feel very close to each other?). Items were measured using a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *not true* (1) to *always true* (4). Responses were summed to reflect greater levels of family support (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), with scores ranging from 5 to 31. Students' responded with moderate levels of family support ( $M = 17.49$ ;  $SD = 4.55$ ).

**Participation in positive peer networks.** This measure was derived from 12 items that examined respondents' participation in social groups that *did not* engage in health-compromising behaviors such as alcohol and drug use (sample items: How many of your friends do the following: Smoke cigarettes? Drink alcohol? Have been arrested?). Items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *all my friends* (1) to *none* (5). Responses were summed to reflect greater levels of social interactions with peers who did not engage in negative health-compromising behaviors (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ). Participants' responses ranged from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 60, with students identifying moderate levels of positive peer interactions ( $M = 47.26$ ;  $SD = 5.95$ ).

**Ethnic identity.** Ethnic identity was derived from six items that examined adolescents' level of ethnic identity, connectedness, and belongingness (sample items: I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs? I think a lot about how my life is affected by my ethnic group membership?). Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly agree* (4) to *strongly disagree* (1). Items were summed (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ), with participants' responses ranging from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 24, with students identifying moderate levels of ethnic group attachment ( $M = 15.68$ ;  $SD = 3.25$ ).

## Data Analysis Plan

Missing data were examined using SPSS missing data analysis features, with the most amount of missing data associated with sexual risk behavior (15%), which is not uncommon given the sensitivity of the associated question and the probability for methodological response bias (van de Mortel, 2008). Missing data were handled in SPSS v.21.0 using a chained equations imputation approach (Schafer & Graham, 2002). These items were imputed at the scale level, which is an appropriate method of imputing missing data (Plumpton, Morris, Hughes, & White, 2016). Ten multiple imputation (MI) iterations were used, with complete blocks resulting (Allison, 2002; McGinniss & Harel, 2016). Following MI, bivariate correlations, means, and standard deviations were analyzed (see Table 1). Normality and issues of collinearity were also examined using standard cutoffs (Field, 2013). All variables were within appropriate parameters, with variance inflation factor (VIF) less than 10 (Field, 2013). Finally, an independent-samples *t* test was run between gender groups to assess preliminary gender differences among main analytic variables. Results indicated a significant difference between gender groups for sexual risk behavior,  $t(585) = 4.11, p < .01$ ; school importance,  $t(585) = -4.67, p < .001$ ; family support,  $t(585) = -2.17, p < .01$ ; and ethnic identity,  $t(585) = -1.81, p = .06$ , was marginally significant. Participation in positive peer networks showed, however, no difference between gender groups. Findings provide preliminary evidence of gender differences among main variables.

Following preliminary analyses, main analytic procedures involved running a set of hierarchical multiple regression models that were performed separately for males and females. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses with 5,000 bootstrap resamples (Wright, London, & Field, 2011) were used to examine the effect independent variables had on school importance (see Table 2). In Model 1, the unique and independent effect of *sexual risk behavior* on *school importance* was examined between males and females. Next, in Model 2, *family support* and *participation in positive peer networks* were added to the analysis. In Model 3, *ethnic identity* was examined as a fourth explanatory variable. To answer our research question, in the last step, ethnic identity was examined as a potential moderator between males and females. Subsequent analyses involved using a plotting technique to visualize moderating effects.

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

Refer to Table 2 for results. Correlation analyses examined relationships among main study variables and potential controls. All independent variables were correlated ( $p < .001$ ) with school importance. There were, however,

**Table 2.** Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors of School Importance and the Moderating Effect of Ethnic Identity Between Males and Females (Standardized Beta Coefficients Reported).

Variables	Coefficients (SE)							
	Males				Females			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sexual risk behavior	-.29*** (.04)	-.27*** (.04)	-.28*** (.04)	-.25*** (.04)	-.25*** (.04)	-.18*** (.04)	.21*** (.04)	-.23*** (.04)
Family support	.38 *** (.05)	.36*** (.05)	.36*** (.05)	.35*** (.05)	.26*** (.04)	.26*** (.04)	.22*** (.04)	.23*** (.04)
Participation in positive peer networks		.06 (.05)	.05 (.05)	.09 (.05)		.11* (.04)	.11* (.04)	.11* (.04)
Ethnic identity			.14** (.07)	.11* (.07)			.25*** (.06)	.28*** (.06)
Family Support x Ethnic Identity				-.04 (.01)				-.07 (.01)
Sexual Risk x Ethnic Identity				.14** (.01)				.12** (.01)
Positive Peer Networks x Ethnic Identity				.15** (.01)				.01 (.01)
R <sup>2</sup>	.08	.23	.25	.29	.06	.14	.20	.22
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.09***	.15***	.02***	.03*	.07***	.09***	.06***	.02*

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

some variation in results between males and females. For instance, among males, sexual risk behavior was not correlated with ethnic identity, whereas interestingly for females, sexual risk behavior and ethnic identity were positively associated. Although this may appear surprising, prior studies have shown ethnic identity to increase maladjustment such as alcohol use (Zamboanga, Schwartz, Jarvis, & Van Tyne, 2009) and delinquency among Hispanic adolescents (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006). The strongest association for Hispanic males was between school importance and family support ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ), as well as sexual risk behavior and participation in positive peer networks ( $r = -.38, p < .01$ ). For Hispanic females, the strongest relationship was between family support and school importance ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ). Reliability coefficients were also within acceptable range.

### Analytic Results

Results were derived from multivariate hierarchical regression analyses to assess the effect sexual risk behavior, family support, participating in positive peer networks, and ethnic identity had on school importance between Hispanic adolescent males and females. In addition, the moderating influence of ethnic identity was further examined among present independent variables on school importance between males and females. Results are presented in Table 2 and ranged from moderate (.05-.09) to strong (greater than .10; Field, 2013).

Model 1 predicted 8% and 6% of the overall variance in school importance between males and females, respectively (see Table 2). In this model, sexual risk behavior had a significant negative impact on school importance for males ( $b = -.29, p < .001$ ) and females ( $b = -.25, p < .001$ ). Next, Model 2 predicted 23% and 14% of the variance in school importance for males and females, correspondingly. Sexual risk behavior continued to have a negative impact on school importance for males and females; however, family support and positive peer influences showed equally important effects, with participation in positive peer networks only having an impact on school importance for Hispanic females ( $b = .11, p < .05$ ). Model 2 significantly increased overall goodness of fit for both gender groups ( $R^2$  change = .15 for males;  $R^2$  change = .09 for females).

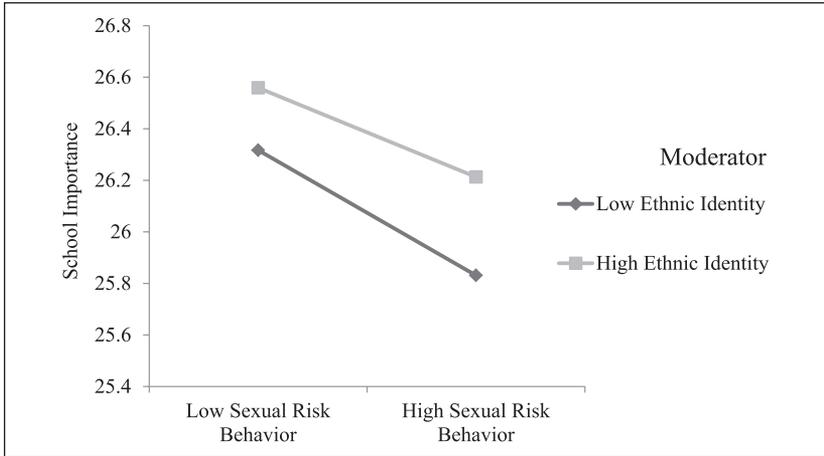
Model 3 added ethnic identity as an additional explanatory variable for school importance, and predicted 25% of the variance in school importance for males and 20% for females. In Model 3, sexual risk behavior continued to have a significant negative influence on school importance for both gender groups. In addition, the impact of family support remained a significant indicator of school importance and strongest for males. Participation in positive peer networks, although having a lower overall effect, remained a significant indicator of school importance for females only. The addition of ethnic identity was statistically significant between both gender groups, but had the greatest effect for females

( $b = .25, p < .001$ ). The addition of ethnic identity significantly increased overall goodness of fit ( $R^2$  change = .02 for males;  $R^2$  change = .06 for females).

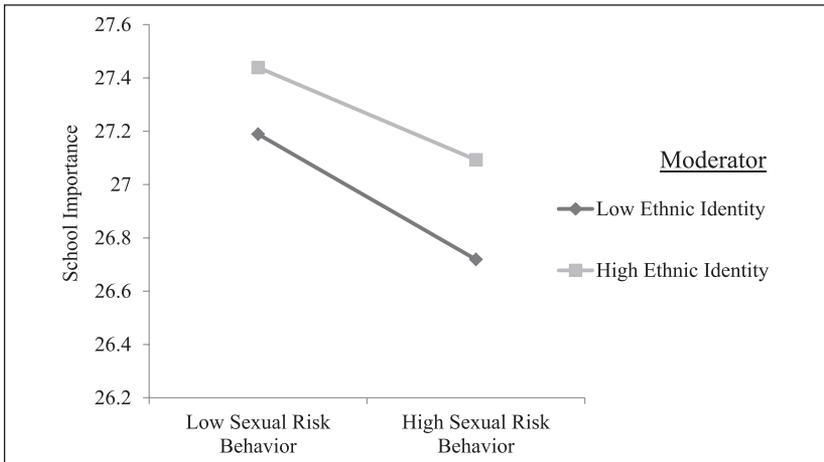
Model 4 considered the moderating effect of ethnic identity as a compensatory variable and accounted for 29% of the variance in school importance for males and 22% for females. Adding interaction effects also improved model fit for both gender groups ( $R^2$  change = .03 for males;  $R^2$  change = .02 for females). Results illustrate that although sexual risk behavior has a negative influence on school importance in isolation, the presence of a strong ethnic identity buffered the negative impact of sexual risk behavior on school importance for both males and females. In addition, although in previous models, participation in positive peer networks was not a significant indicator of school importance for Hispanic males, the presence of a more solidified ethnic identity augmented the effect of such peer group participation on school importance. Family support remained a significant independent indicator of school importance for both gender groups; however, ethnic identity did not moderate the effect family support had on school importance for neither males nor females. Results from Model 4 begin to point toward the theoretical and practical importance of a solidified ethnic identity, particularly as it relates to sexual risk behavior and peer engagement on school importance.

The size of this effect is not easily understood by the coefficients alone. To help understand the moderating effect of ethnic identity, a plotting technique described as useful for visualizing moderating effects was used (Dawson, 2014; Lardier, MacDonnell, Barrios, Garcia-Reid, & Reid, 2017). Variables with significant interaction effects were plotted (see Figures 1 to 3). As depicted in Figure 1, higher levels of ethnic identity limited the negative impact sexual risk behavior had on school importance; this effect was also present for females (see Figure 2). These results indicate that ethnic identity buffers the detrimental influence of sexually risky behavior on school importance and that youth with more solidified ethnic identities have a greater value for school. Figure 3 illustrates that ethnic identity augments the relationship between participating in positive peer networks and school importance for Hispanic males.

Results from these four models illustrate that first, sexual risk behavior had a negative effect on school importance for both Hispanic males and females. Second, family support had a robust and important direct effect on school importance for both Hispanic males and females, whereas participation in positive peer groups had a positive direct effect among females only. Third, among Hispanic males, the presence of a solidified ethnic identity (i.e., moderating effect) augmented the influence participation in positive peer networks had on school importance; this result was not present for females. Hence, among Hispanic adolescent males, a stronger ethnic group connection may also indicate participation in positive peer networks with similar ethnic/cultural beliefs and values, which in turn effects school importance. Finally, although sexually

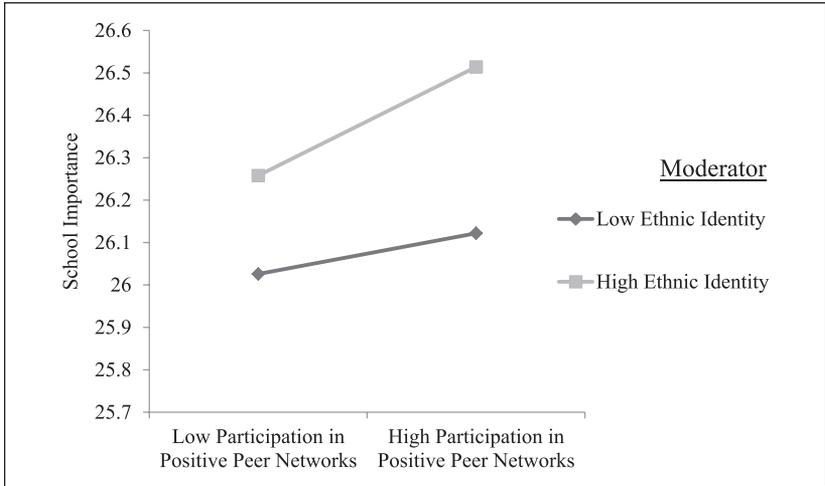


**Figure 1.** Interaction between ethnic identity and sexual risk behavior on school importance for Hispanic males.



**Figure 2.** Interaction between ethnic identity and sexual risk behavior on school importance for Hispanic females.

risky behavior continued to have a negative effect on school importance, the presence of a solidified ethnic identity buffered the negative influence of sexually risky behavior on school importance for Hispanic males and females.



**Figure 3.** Interaction between ethnic identity and participation in positive peer networks on school importance for Hispanic males.

### Discussion

This study emphasized the ever-present hazards that sexual risk taking can introduce including potentially derailing the academic futures and career aspirations of Hispanic youth. Nevertheless, despite these risk indicators, adolescents’ sexual risk involvement seemed to be offset by the teens’ strong ethnic identities, which was also associated with positive school orientations among Hispanic youth. The public discourse, including the media and political outlets, far too often depict Hispanic youth in ways that portray and reflect negative stereotypes or exaggerated illustrations of teenage pregnancy or sexual irresponsibility, which can become internalized and in fact contribute to low educational attainment (Gómez, Munte, & Sorde, 2014). Yet, evidence suggests that clinging to, and drawing from, the cultural strengths of the Hispanic community, which is associated, for example, with strong ethnic identities, can insulate Hispanic adolescents and increase their perception of school as an important agent in shaping their futures (Hernández, Conger, Robins, Bacher, & Widaman, 2014; Hughes, Im, Kwok, Cham, & West, 2015). In particular, efforts that focus on increasing continuity between Hispanic students’ home culture and the culture within the school appear to be vital (Hernández et al., 2014). Research has examined the relationship between ethnic-racial socialization and ethnic identity in promoting positive youth outcomes, including

academic achievement (Gartner, Kiang, & Supple, 2014; Umaña-Taylor, O'Donnell et al., 2014). The theoretical reasoning of this work implies high levels of ethnic-racial socialization promote a strong ethnic identity, which is then associated with positive outcomes including in the areas of academic bonding and school success (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana et al., 2014).

The presence of social support offered by families also bolstered the internalization of school importance for Hispanic adolescents. This finding is consistent with the literature on Hispanic communities, which are typically described as oriented toward family well-being (DiBello, Gonzales, Young, Rodriguez, & Neighbors, 2015; Gonzales, Germán, & Fabrett, 2012) to the extent that "*familismo*" remains as a vital cultural value among U.S. Hispanics (Kennedy & Ceballos, 2013). As many Hispanic families have become targets of political policies and growing anti-Hispanic/Hispanophobic sentiments, the need to inoculate Hispanic adolescents from both macroaggressions and structural deficits becomes essential and an urgent strategy for increasing the possibility of school success. Support provided by families can provide an armor of emotional protection and fuel the motivation needed to navigate their educational landscapes. Evidence suggests that the family construct is an important contextual variable that is associated with students' own expectations of their school environment and their perceptions of school life (Hernández et al., 2014; Way & Robinson, 2003). The centrality of *familismo* among Hispanics also plays a significant role in academic motivation, student performance, and success and is closely associated with their future plans (González, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006).

For many low income Hispanic teens, the threats within their educational pathways are often riddled with numerous educational inequities, including lack of teacher preparedness and school systems that fail to recognize the cultural strengths and potential of Hispanic teens (Vilson, 2015). This is evidenced by the more than half of all Hispanic students not being directed toward classes that will prepare them for higher education (Hill & Torres, 2010), and underrepresentation of Hispanic students in advanced placement courses and gifted and talented education programs (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). In addition, schools in less resourced communities simply do not offer the same range and level of courses as their more affluent suburban counterparts (Mijs, 2015; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Yet, the support provided by Hispanic families can secure the foundation by which Hispanic students can tether themselves to the hopes and dreams that many Hispanic families have for their children, particularly in this new era of uncertainty, which can propel Hispanic students toward embracing the value of school importance. Schools that are able to successfully build collaborations with Hispanic families can provide an ecological safety net for Hispanic adolescents that bridge the connection

between school and home, and authentically engages Hispanic teens, and their families, in potential-building and academically supporting dialogues. Akin to the benefit gained by family support, peer support was found to increase the perception of school importance among Hispanic adolescents.

Positive peer influences can be a significant protective factor for Hispanic adolescents growing up in high-risk environments. In addition to feeling connected to supportive peers, Hispanic adolescents who feel a sense of cultural belonging are inclined to demonstrate higher levels of functioning in various psychological domains (Umaña-Taylor, O'Donnell et al., 2014). According to Crosnoe et al. (2003), peer support can encourage achievement through increased motivation and greater participation in academically related activities. In this study, peer support compounded the value of school importance as a priority in life among Hispanic adolescents. However, important variations were noted between adolescent males and adolescent females in regard to peer support. In particular, positive peer influences among Hispanic males combined with strong ethnic identities increased the teens' connection to school and their perception of school importance, whereas among Hispanic females, positive peer groups had a direct influence on the teens' perception of school importance regardless of ethnic identity. Our findings appear to be consistent with literature when examining gender differences in the formation of positive peer groups. Adolescent females' ability to form close knit friendships are often due to societal and gender norms and expectations placed on girls at an early age (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Such norms allow adolescent females to form meaningful friendships that have deep intimacy and provide high levels of social support more effortlessly than males (Fehr, 2004). Other research in gender peer differences reveals that adolescent females are more likely to have connection-oriented goals such as mutual participation and supportiveness in addition to endorsing intimacy and nurturance within their friendships than adolescent males (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Ethnic minority males may have a difficult time developing close and positive peer relationships in adolescence due to messages regarding "manhood" and "masculinity", which may cause them to distance themselves away from forming meaningful friendships (Santos, Galligan, Pahlke, & Fabes, 2013; Way et al., 2014). Such messages pertaining to masculinity in adolescent males resist the notion of boys being able to be sensitive and vulnerable with other males, thus making it difficult to form sustainable and supportive peer groups (Way, 2011). However, within the context of Hispanic culture, ethnic identity is likely to enhance Hispanic males' ability to maintain and possess intimate and positive male friendships (Way, 2012). Research has consistently found that Hispanic families strongly value the open expression of emotions, interpersonal relationships, and friendships (Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009; López et al., 2009; Rivera et al., 2008).

Thus, Hispanic adolescent males with strong ethnic identity may have been socialized by cultural and familial values to maintain strong connections with their peers which allow for intimacy and vulnerability within their peer groups.

### *School-Based Implications*

School administrators can directly influence and alter academic connections in various ways. For example, they can stipulate that their school's health education protocol contains evidence-based, cultural resonant, and linguistically appropriate sexual health information that is both comprehensive and contains contraceptive information (Reid & Garcia-Reid, 2013; Reid, Yu, & Garcia-Reid, 2014). These efforts can go a long way in creating a school culture that reduces barriers and access to health education information and improves school bonding. Administrators, teachers, and school counselors can serve as key conduits in providing safe spaces, and places, for Hispanic students to come together in affirming ways, as well as Hispanic students and non-Hispanic students alike, who can cooperatively work toward educationally empowering common goals and interests. For Hispanic boys in particular, these shared experiences with other teens of similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds can provide both needed support and possible motivation to remain educationally directed (i.e., birds of a feather flock together). Interventions can focus on creating an empowered school community where young people can collectively give voice to issues that directly impact their well-being and engage in activities that promote their educational possibilities.

The communities and schools urban youth of color attend, specifically Hispanic youth, often lack the necessary social and organizational infrastructures to facilitate socioemotional growth, ethnic identity, and, in turn, collective-democratic voice (Lardier, Herr, Barrios, Garcia-Reid, & Reid, in press). Youth who have opportunities to use their voice and engage in activities that promote democratic activism, particularly with individuals of like racial-ethnic background, are likely to develop more solidified ethnic identities, as well as have a greater connection to their school environment (Forenza, Rogers, & Lardier, 2017). Schools can be used as social spaces to promote democratic participation (Dewey, 2004), voice, and, as Freire (1968/2014) discusses, *critical consciousness*, or the process of critically reading one's world and social conditions. Schools that support and promote such participation can help youth develop a more nuanced analysis of their inequitable social conditions and, consequently, develop the necessary counter-narratives to the question their social locations and engage in "solutions," actionable change, and prevention activities (Kirshner, Hipolito-Delgado, & Zion, 2015; Lardier et al., in

press; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Hence, educational researchers, school administrators, and teachers must begin to provide opportunities for urban youth of color, and specifically Hispanic youth, to engage in democratic participation as agents of social and systemic change. Doing so will allow these youth to become less constrained by their social conditions and powerless and, instead, develop the necessary agency and capacity to change their conditions, and resolve developmental challenges that impede on their own individual, as well as collective growth (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016).

The school community must also recognize the intrinsic worth of Hispanic families in general and work toward creating more inclusive and welcoming educational environments that promote supportive ties between parent/adult and adolescents. School-based programs should also be implemented that are culturally and linguistically accessible to Hispanic families and provide tangible resources that could aid them in understanding and navigating through the U.S. educational system. School-placed empowering agents, including counselors and teachers, must be prepared to shepherd the efforts of Hispanic students and their families and challenge stereotypes that often place the burden of responsibility squarely on the shoulders of minority youth (Garcia-Reid, 2007). These mentors could advocate for the implementation of ethically sound educational policies and practices that increase school attachments, recognize the value that Hispanic students possess, and work toward dismantling systems of oppression and discrimination that disproportionately channel young people of color, particularly Hispanics, into increasingly segregated and less challenging programs of study. For Hispanic boys, pairing youth with ethnic-racial like mentors who can help develop and solidify their ethnic identity can potentially deepen connections to self and supportive others, and potentially reinforce the formation and growth of school-oriented, prosocial identities. Schools that are able to fortify these relationships and draw upon the cultural orientation and value of collectivism and *familismo* are better positioned to utilize long standing traditions that have aided Hispanic communities by building bridges of support among schools, Hispanic students, their families, and peer groups.

### *Limitations*

There are, however, several limitations to the study. First, its cross-sectional design limited its ability to infer causal relationships and control for alternative explanations of the study findings. Second, the assessments used in the present study were all self-report instruments and therefore exclusively grounded in the adolescent's perceptions of the independent and dependent variables. An associated limitation concerns the sampling of students, as those students who participated in the study may not include adolescents, for example, who were

“pushed out” or dropped out of school. In addition, active parental consent, which is required in the focal state, can influence sampling, consent procedures, and reduce the overall response rate of students (White, Hill, & Effendi, 2004). Consequently, the lived experiences of those students with varying degrees of family support, participation in positive peer networks, and ethnic identity may not have been included. Future research needs to consider this limitation and begin to engage school districts to sample larger numbers of students to offset associated methodological issues related to response bias (White et al., 2004). Furthermore, because a range of other possible measures, both objective and subjective (i.e., report cards, parent assessments, teacher evaluations), were not included in the study, the possibility of mono-method bias could not be ruled out. Despite the inherent limitation introduced with self-report survey data in which youth may overreport or underreport certain behaviors (e.g., grades, sexual risk taking, available supports), researchers have argued that adolescents are the best informants of their own situations, behaviors, and feelings (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991). Third, Hispanics in the United States are a heterogeneous, multifaceted population. Although a common language binds them, they comprise a multicultural community rich in internal diversity and often have received dissimilar government and societal receptions (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana et al., 2014). As such, future research should aim to include separate subgroup analyses of Hispanic adolescents who represent different national origins with their own sociopolitical history and pathways into the United States. Moreover, there remain additional unanswered questions that could serve to further contextualize the study findings. For example, parceling out school, community, and structural/environmental influences and assessing migration and acculturation experiences could provide deeper more embedded explanations of the study findings.

## **Conclusion**

Hispanics remain at an educational disadvantage in the United States and the educational gap is a troubling indicator of the educational crisis that is currently besetting a disproportionate number of Hispanic children. Yet, schools that are able to harness the numerous assets embedded within the Hispanic community, such as their strong sense of ethnic identity, and family and peer support, are well positioned to create learning environments that are encouraging, are culturally responsive, and can potentially reduce risk involvement that may interfere with valuing the role of school importance. Ultimately, effective school-based strategies ought to compliment and embrace the strengths and resources of the Hispanic community and endeavor to improve school attachment, engagement, and overall school success rates among this culturally rich and educationally capable population.

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