Developmental Assets and Ethnic Identity as Predictors of Thriving in Hispanic Adolescents

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Abstract
This study examined the confluence of developmental assets, ethnic identity, and acculturative stress in the prediction of thriving among Hispanic adolescents. Thriving is used to encompass youth who are not only doing well now but who are also on the trajectory toward overall success. Study participants included 130 self-reported Hispanic middle and high school students participating in a leadership program specifically geared toward at-risk students. The results indicated that ethnic identity and developmental assets positively predict adolescent thriving. As expected, the correlations between developmental assets scores (context and category) and composite thriving were all significant and positive. Specifically, internal assets and ethnic identity were the main predictors of thriving according to regression analysis. Implications for professionals working with Hispanic youth are discussed.

Keywords
developmental assets, positive youth development, thriving, Hispanic adolescents

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Hispanics make up 16% of the total U.S. population and 23% of this population is under the age of 18. The estimated number of Hispanics under the age of 18 is 11.6 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Despite these trends, the availability of contemporary evidence-based information specifically related to normative Hispanic adolescent youth is limited. Research has failed to keep up with the rapid growth among Hispanics (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). A comprehensive review of six youth development journals and two leading Hispanic-focused journals revealed that of 1,010 empirical articles, 30% included Hispanic adolescents, 6% reported results for Hispanic adolescents, and less than 3% focused on Hispanic adolescents (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). In addition, the study of Hispanic youth has followed in accordance with research on all youth in that it has been historically dominated by efforts to name measure and predict problem behaviors such as substance abuse, academic failure, and teenage pregnancy (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

**Strength-Based Approaches to the Study of Hispanic Youth**

The paucity of research on Hispanic youth has resulted in a call for studies that address normative patterns of development among Hispanic youth (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). Positive youth developmental (PYD) approaches (see, for example, Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011) emphasize constructs that describe positive potential for growth and change in human development. In contrast to problem-focused dialogues and descriptions centering on Hispanics as an “at-risk” population, PYD efforts address adaptive functioning and overall well-being.

Thriving is one such indicator of PYD. *Thriving* describes a positive developmental trajectory focused on adaptive goals beyond “survival” (Benson & Scales, 2009). Thriving involves making contributions to one’s own life, family, and community (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). In addition, individuals who are thriving are making choices and committing themselves to activities that minimize the probability of negative developmental outcomes and maximize success and well-being (Benson & Scales, 2009). Research on indicators of thriving have identified 15 theoretical markers in adolescents that include characteristics of individual and personal beliefs (e.g., openness, prosocial attitudes) as well as aspects of interpersonal environment (e.g., social supports from friends and family). Thus, thriving
may be characterized as functionally adaptability through active engagement in a variety of sociocultural contexts (Benson & Scales, 2009).

**Developmental Assets**

Developmental assets are sources of internal and external support for development that in addition serve as protective factors (Benard, 1991; Benson & Lerner, 2003). Developmental assets include opportunities, skills, relationships, values, and self-perceptions that all young people need in their lives for them to achieve the goals prescribed by the mainstream society (Benson & Lerner, 2003; Lerner, 1998). Previous research supports developmental assets on PYD. Adolescents who report higher levels of developmental assets are less likely to engage in problem behaviors and more likely to have positive outcomes (Scales & Leffert, 2004). For example, a number of specific developmental assets on the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP; see Scales & Leffert, 2004) and thriving have been shown to be closely related and often predictive of one another (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Scales et al., 2000). There seems to be consistency in findings that indicate the more developmental assets juveniles experience, the more likely they will avoid deviant behaviors and become positive, contributing members of the community (García et al., 1996). Similarly, in a more recent study, researchers Smith and Barker (2008) indicated that thriving behaviors were positively related to both internal and external assets. According to their research, indicators of thriving included self-reported earned grades, helping others, leadership, valuing diversity, getting along with adults, self-care, self-regulation, and resiliency. These indicators are consistent with those developed from factor analysis reported by Benson and Scales (2009).

**Ethnic Identity as a Developmental Asset**

Ethnic identity is an area of adolescent development that has received some attention and is often viewed as an aspect of personal identity (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). Ethnic identity is often an essential component of an individuals’ personal identity, feelings of belonging, commitment, and affirmation of life satisfaction with a specific group and its membership (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Scales et al. (2011) found that ethnic identity ($\beta = .335$) was only second to overall purpose ($\beta = .357$) in relative contribution to overall success to positive outcomes made by demographic characteristics and the total number of developmental assets (Benson & Scales, 2009). Ethnic identity has been identified as a protective factor for Hispanic adolescents (Castro et al., 2007; Cavazos-Rehg & DeLucia-Waack, 2009; Constatine
& Sue, 2006; Greig, 2003; Rayle & Myers, 2004). According to research conducted by Weaver (2010), ethnic identity revealed to have a positive association with factors of resilience despite ethnicity. Unfortunately, as many minority group adolescents find themselves vulnerable to the pressure to conform or subjugate their native ethnic identity to that of the dominant culture, adolescents with strong ethnic identities are more capable of effectively handling negative stereotypes and prejudice (Phinney, 1992). This struggle to balance adaptation to the new ideas and culture while maintaining security associated with native culture may also often cause considerable stress.

**Acculturative Stress**

Acculturative stress often accompanies psychosocial adaptation efforts (acculturation) made by members of one culture as a result of contact with another culture (Burnam, Telles, Karno, Hough, & Escobar, 1987). The acculturation process may involve learning and using a new or second language, using specified and unspecified social rules, customs, values, attitudes, resources, and functioning in compliance with the environment to be socially competent. The stress associated with this process has been associated with a number of negative health outcomes and risk behaviors for the acculturating population (Lara, Gamboa, Kahramanian, Morales, & Bautista, 2005). Acculturative stress has a negative impact on adolescent identity formation, school performance, and prosocial behavior (Alva, 1994; Alva & de Los Reyes, 1999; Alva & Jones, 1994; Cordova, 2006; Hovey & King, 1996; Samaniego & Gonzales, 1999). For example, Hovey and King (1996) examined the relationship between acculturative stress, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation in a sample of immigrant and second-generation Latino American adolescents. Results indicated 25% of the adolescents reported critical levels of depression and suicidal ideation and these critical levels were positively correlated with acculturative stress. Recent research supports these findings; Crockett et al (2007) found acculturative stress as a contributing factor to higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms among Mexican American college students. Similarly, Perez, Voelz, Pettit, and Joiner (2002) reported a strong correlation among body dissatisfaction and bulimia with minority young women who expressed high levels of acculturative stress and a nonsignificant correlation with minority young women with low acculturative stress. Such findings support the need for continual and thorough examination of cultural variables and the influence they have on adolescent development.

This study addresses the predictive impact of developmental assets, ethnic identity, and acculturative stress on a composite thriving measure among
Hispanic youth attending an urban public school in the south. Since previous research on adolescent development has generally focused on negative outcomes and problem behaviors (Scales et al., 2000), this study attempts to look at youth through the lens of “what are they doing right.” In addition, this study further expands on previous research by examining cultural variables and their relation to development assets and thriving. Based on previous literature, it was hypothesized that thriving would be positively predicted by level of ethnic identity and developmental assets, while acculturative stress would negatively impact the positive trajectory of Hispanic adolescents.

Method

Participants and Setting

A total of 130 students participating in a leadership program on their respective school campus located in South Texas were recruited for this study. The sample included 83 females and 47 males, who were in Grades 6 through 12. The average age of participants was 15.6 years with a range of 11 to 20 years. Only participants who reported being Hispanic or Latino/Latina were included in this analysis. Specific origin was neither asked nor noted. The school district from which the participants were recruited is predominately Hispanic (79%), with the remainder consisting of White (14.1%), Black/African American (4.1%), Asian (1.8%), and Other (2.8%). The leadership program serves at-risk youth; the mission is to prepare and motivate at-risk youth in the area of leadership, education, achievement, and development.

Measures

A demographic instrument was designed specifically for this research that gathered standard demographic information. Information included age, gender, school/grade level, and ethnicity. Report of ethnicity was based on categories provided on the questionnaire that instructed students to check all that apply. The categories included American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic or Latino/Latina, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and Other. Several standardized instruments were also used to measure the variables explored in this study.

Developmental Assets Profile. The 58-item Developmental Assets Profile (Search Institute, 2005) was used to measure the developmental asset categories (external and internal) and context areas (personal, social, family, school, and community). External assets are resources available to youth through
family and society, such as family or neighborhood support, positive adult role models, youth programs, and a safe environment. Internal assets are values or competencies that youth have internalized, such as achievement motivation, honesty, integrity, and self-esteem (www.search-institute.org). The five context areas are personal, social, family, school, and community. The DAP uses a simple four-step response scale for all 58 items. Participants in this study were asked to check if the item was true within a 3-month time frame using the following responses: not at all or rarely, somewhat or sometimes, very or often, and extremely or almost always. Thus, they were asked to choose the answer that best described them “now or within the past 3 months.” The total asset score provides a global index of reported developmental assets: this score ranged from 0 to 60. In previous research, the DAP showed high internal consistency with alphas ranging from .85 to .97 across the DAP asset categories and context areas. In the present study, the DAP showed high internal consistency with alphas ranging from .84 to .92.

**Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure.** The 12-item Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992) was used to assess ethnic identity. The total ethnic identity score is derived by summing the 12 items and their responses that range from strongly agree (4) to strongly disagree (1) and obtaining a mean. The higher score on the total scale indicates a stronger ethnic identity. In the literature, reliability estimates range from .70 to .86 with multiethnic samples (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999). For this study, alpha reliability for the total scale was .89.

**Social, Attitudinal, Family, and Environment Acculturation Stress Scale for Children.** The Social, Attitudinal, Family, and Environment Acculturation Stress Scale for Children (SAFE-C; Chavez, Moran, Reid, & Lopez, 1997) was used to assess adolescents’ experience of acculturative stress. The SAFE-C is a version of the SAFE scale and was designed for use among school-age children between the ages of 8 and 12 years. The SAFE-C was developed by rephrasing the short 24-item SAFE scale items into more age-appropriate language and contexts. The scale used in this study consisted of 34 items from the scale divided into two domains. General social stressors that are common to adolescents were described by 16 items. The remaining 18 items measured potential stressors that may result from the acculturation process. For this study, only the questions related to stressors from the acculturation process were used to obtain a total acculturative stress score. The instrument uses a 6-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 0 (does not apply) to 5 (bothers me a lot). In previous research, the high alpha value (.86) suggested that the SAFE-C is a reliable measure of acculturative stress in adolescents.
This is comparable with the adult versions of the SAFE scale with high alpha reliabilities found by Mena, Padilla, and Maldonado (1987) and Fuertes and Westbrook (1996). The alpha reliability score for this study was .76.

Thriving. The thriving survey consisted of 25 Likert-type questions as well as questions that required participants to choose the answer that best fit their response. To measure thriving among adolescents, questions from the Profile of Student Life: Attitude and Behavior (A&B) survey developed by the Search Institute (2008) were used. The A&B survey is used to measure thriving and risk-taking behaviors among adolescents. All questions from the A&B survey that measured thriving were used. Items included were “Taking good care of my body (such as eating foods that are good for me, exercising regularly, and eating three good meals a day) is”; “I enjoy helping others without getting paid (such as volunteering at a hospital, shelter, or church) to make my community a better place for people to live”; “Respecting the values and belief of people who are of different race than I am is.” Additional questions developed by the researchers were also used to aid in measuring thriving. Questions were adapted from the indicators of thriving developed by Benson and Scales (2009). Examples of questions are “I like to see the positive side of things rather than the negative,” “when I want something I want it now or never,” “I think it is important to have good health.” Thriving behaviors were measured by seven indicators that include, academic success, helping others, valuing diversity, maintaining good health, delaying gratification, overcoming adversity, and optimism. These indicators are consistent with the indicators of thriving developed from factor analysis reported by Benson and Scales. Each thriving indicator was measured with three survey questions. The thriving indicators were scored as a continuous variable with higher scores indicating higher levels of thriving. A composite thriving score was computed to serve as an index of thriving. This composite index of thriving comprised summing the indicators of thriving and obtaining the mean. The reliability for the thriving instrument was .85.

Results

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the DAP context areas and categories, thriving, acculturative stress, and ethnic identity. As shown in Table 1, the students varied in their level of self-reported total developmental assets ($M = 41.16, SD = 10.5$). Separate scores for context areas and categories (internal and external assets) were computed. The means on the internal and external assets and context area scores ranged from 19.99 to 21.81, which suggested that students reported between “fair” and “good” assets. The DAP User’s
Manual (2005) provides interpretation criteria of mean scores that comprise levels of low, fair, good, and excellent. The means of the context areas that include personal, social, family, school, and community were also computed. The means ranged from 18.71 to 21.81, for all but one (community) comprised the good label. Community was within the “fair” range, which constitutes having borderline assets that are weak and/or infrequent. Preliminary data analysis revealed no significant gender differences ($p > .05$), on the study constructs. Therefore, the gender (female, male) factor was not addressed further. Accordingly, all correlations between developmental assets scores (context and category), ethnic identity, and composite thriving were all significant and positive. Acculturative stress showed no significant correlations between the variables.

To explore hypothesized predictive relationships with thriving, the composite thriving score was regressed on assets (internal and external), acculturative stress, and ethnic identity. Regression results showed that composite thriving scores are significantly predicted by a combination of the independent variables. In specific, the predictive model (assets, acculturative stress, and ethnic identity) accounts for 46% of the variance of the thriving composite score, $R^2 = .47$, $R^2_{adj} = .46$, $F(4,129) = 28.02, p \leq .001$. As seen in Table 2, internal assets ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$; $sr = .31$) and ethnic identity ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$; $sr = .39$) contributed significantly to the model. The squared semipartial correlation of ethnic identity indicated that 15% of the unique variability of the thriving score is explained by ethnic identity and 10% is uniquely

| Table 1. Means of all scores: DAP, thriving, acculturative stress, and ethnic identity ($N = 130$). |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------|
|                                                  | $M$           | $SD$          |
| External assets                                  | 19.99         | 5.88          |
| Internal assets                                  | 21.18         | 5.33          |
| Total assets                                     | 41.16         | 10.50         |
| Personal                                         | 21.38         | 5.30          |
| Social                                           | 21.25         | 5.49          |
| Family                                           | 21.81         | 7.23          |
| School                                           | 21.72         | 6.04          |
| Community                                        | 18.17         | 6.35          |
| Acculturative stress                             | 1.54          | 0.78          |
| Ethnic identity                                  | 2.80          | 0.76          |
| Composite thriving                               | 3.76          | 0.54          |

Note. DAP = Developmental Assets Profile.
explained by internal assets. In addition, bivariate, partial, and part correlation coefficients between each independent and the dependent variable are also presented in the table.

### Discussion

Our findings indicate that internal assets are especially predictive of thriving among Hispanic adolescents. Also important is that assets that are evident in the context of positive identification with the ethnic group were associated with thriving. The findings in this study are consistent with the research literature on developmental assets and their contribution to thriving (Jain, Buka, Subramanian, & Molnar, 2012; Valois, Zullig, Huebner, & Drane, 2009; Wang, Chen, Tang, Lee, & Jian, 2011). According to the results of the regression analyses, the main predictors of thriving are ethnic identity and internal assets. This same pattern was found in Scales et al. (2011). Results suggest that ethnic identity appears to have a significant positive relationship with thriving. The secondary main predictor was internal assets. Internal assets are values or competencies that youth have internalized, such as achievement motivation, honesty, integrity, and self-esteem. Internal assets and ethnic identity alone accounted for nearly half (46%) of the variance of thriving. Contrary to our expectations, the pressures typically associated with acculturation (stress) did not seem to impact our population of adolescents adversely. The acculturation level and generational status of the students may be an explanation for the findings. However, generational status was not identified, and many of the students may be second or third generation removed. Due to this, common stressors of the acculturation process such as language barriers and familial factors may not have been experienced by the study population.

There were several limitations in the present study. The study population was not a random sample, and it included only participants in a school-based leadership program. Although the leadership program was geared to students

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<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Bivariate r</th>
<th>Partial r</th>
<th>Part</th>
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<td>External assets</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>-.143</td>
<td>-1.386</td>
<td>.168</td>
<td>.435</td>
<td>-.123</td>
<td>-.090</td>
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<td>Internal assets</td>
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<td>.475</td>
<td>4.757</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.566</td>
<td>.391</td>
<td>.309</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acculturative stress</td>
<td>-.032</td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>-0.703</td>
<td>.483</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>-.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic identity</td>
<td>.321</td>
<td>.452</td>
<td>6.010</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.588</td>
<td>.473</td>
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who were considered at risk, the study could be seen as biased. Students participating in such a program can be thought of as thriving. Similar research that uses a random sampling approach could be worthwhile to prevent any such bias. Another limitation is not having information regarding generational status; it would be interesting to analyze differences among generation levels. Generational levels can have a distinct effect on variables including ethnic identity and acculturative stress. In addition, there was a significant difference among the number of participants by gender with almost 50% more females (83) than males (47). The self-report nature of all the instruments is another limitation. Researchers cannot know how honestly participants answer. Lastly, a limitation of this study was the inattention given to demographic variables such as gender and age, and how they impact the study variables.

In summary, the present study found that developmental assets have a significant impact on young people’s lives, which confirms the findings of the Search Institute researchers (Scales et al., 2000; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006; Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sesma, & van Dulmen, 2006). One of the unique findings of the present study was the identification of the significant relationship ethnic identity has with developmental assets and thriving behaviors. The literature on ethnic identity supports this finding as it has been shown to serve as a protective factor in previous work (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Scheier, Botvin, Diaz, & Ifill-Williams, 1997). Therefore, ethnic identity can be looked at as an internal asset to be cultivated.

These results provide impetus for the promotion of asset development interventions in the promotion of wellness among youth. Adopting a PYD approach and capitalizing on one’s strengths would be beneficial in the combat of decreasing negative outcomes in youth. Schools and communities can work toward strengthening developmental assets to promote thriving and combat problem behaviors.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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