Adolescent and Peer Social Identities and Academic Outcomes among Latino Youth: The Role of Concordance in Peer Relations

Recent research has indicated that Latino adolescent friendships have important implications for youth academic outcomes (Delgado et. al, 2016). For Latinos, who demonstrate significant disparities in academic achievement compared to other ethnic/racial groups (Child Trends, 2014), friends may be a particularly salient context for academic influences and modeling. Latinos place an increased value on interdependence that extends to relationships outside the family (Way et. al, 2005). Social capital perspectives (Putnam, 2000) suggest that bonding ties, in which relationships between peers are characterized by similarity or concordance in aspects of social identity, may be particularly influential for youth. Yet, disentangling how particular aspects of identity around which youth coalesce may differentially influence their academic outcomes remains important. For example, while some students’ desire for learning may motivate them to seek out like-minded, academically-oriented peers, others may situate themselves in peer networks in which antiestablishment values are endorsed (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Concurrently, research suggests that academically-oriented peers help to promote achievement though modeling, support, and reinforcement (Crosnoe, 2000). In this study, our primary goal was to investigate how peers promote adolescent academic adjustment by evaluating the concordance between the adolescent and their peers in three important social identity domains, academic competence, school connection, and ethnic identity (private and public regard). Specifically, we hypothesized that when adolescents and their peers were concordant in their endorsements of these three domains, this would relate to higher levels of academic adjustment (e.g. grades and educational expectations). Our second goal was to evaluate whether relations between adolescents’ endorsement of social identity domains, peer endorsement of social identity domains, and academic outcomes varied by gender.

Participants were 452 (52% female, 88% US born) Latino adolescents interviewed when adolescents were in the 6th grade ($M_{age} = 11.68$ years, $SD = .62$). Adolescents reported on their background information, academic competence, school connection, ethnic identity, public and private regard, and educational expectations and grades. Youth nominated up to 11 friends from their grade and we constructed four composites of friends’ levels of academic competence, school connection, and ethnic identity public and private regards by taking an average of nominated friends’ levels of respective social domains.

Results. To address our study goals, we used path models that were estimated in Mplus 7.3 using FIML-R to account for missing data. All variables were centered prior to creating interaction terms. Preliminary analyses indicated individual levels of academic competence were related to grades for Latino males and females, and further, this relation was strengthened when youth had peers who also endorsed high levels of academic competence (Figure 1). Additionally, analyses indicated that for Latino females, individual levels of public regard were associated with higher reports of grades, and this relationship was strengthened when Latino females’ peers also endorsed high levels of public regard. For the conference presentation, we plan also to investigate the moderating role of nativity. Additionally, future directions for this line of research (i.e., need for longitudinal peer network analyses), limitations and implications for Latino youth’s academic well-being will be discussed.
Figure 1. Association between adolescents’ academic competence, and grades as moderated by friends’ level of academic competence.

*p < .05; **p < .01.