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Socio-emotional Development in Latin America: Promoting Positive Socio-emotional Development

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A sizable portion of the current research on the socio-emotional development of children and adolescents focuses on negative outcomes of aversive circumstances. However, Lerner (2002) has highlighted the need to explore positive youth development. As such, this special issue aims to explore research on promoting positive socio-emotional development in underrepresented contexts. In doing so, we invited articles on positive development in Latin America, in addition to reports of intervention programs that have shown success and have the potential to be replicated in other settings. Creative programs to address these issues have been implemented at the local, regional and national levels, yet rarely are the results of these interventions disseminated to academic audiences in the U.S.

Keywords: Socio-emotional development, Positive youth development

The vast majority of current theory and knowledge related to socio-emotional development is derived from research conducted in the North America and Europe. In recent years, developmental scholars have increasingly focused on understanding socio-emotional development of children and adolescents in other parts of the world. For example, in 2002, the Study Group on Adolescence in the 21st Century (sponsored by the Society for Research on Adolescence) published an edited volume titled *The World's Youth: Adolescence in Eight Regions of the Globe* (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002).

For the present issue, we solicited articles that move beyond applying concepts from theories derived in North America and Europe to evaluating them critically and proposing alternatives or expansions. This work spread over three issues includes critical evaluations of existing models in a novel context, use of mixed method and qualitative studies to generate new theories of adolescent development, and rigorous cross-cultural tests of widely used developmental models. In that sense, another aim of this special issue was to gather recent studies in this area that were conducted in Latin America—not only to describe the current state of the art on this topic in Latin American contexts, but also to critically

analyze the conclusions reached by the researchers based on the characteristics from different contexts.

The goal of this issue of the *Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies* is to build on this foundation of descriptive work by presenting a new generation of studies that provide a Latin American perspective on socio-emotional development. Ultimately, we hope that the articles contained herein will inform discussions of issues relating to socio-emotional development among children and adolescents, as well as stimulate further research examining basic psychological processes in the context of Latin America.

Issue on Promoting Positive Socio-emotional Development

Richard Lerner's (2002) call for additional focus on positive youth development was not simply the identification of an underexplored part of the developmental literature. Though researchers in general have been proactive in looking at both positive and negative factors in the area of socio-emotional development, rarely has the focus been as sharply narrowed towards promoting positive youth development. In our opinion, Lerner was outlining a paradigm shift in the way perhaps society at large should view human development. He has often stated that children and adolescents are not (to paraphrase Jean-Jacques Rousseau) simply ships at the whim

Work for this special issue was conducted while Lina María Saldarriaga was an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia.

of storms and currents but agentic partners in their own development.

The current issue illustrates this attention to positive youth development through different papers examining a range of topics across various developmental periods and, perhaps more interestingly, from a number of contexts within Latin America. Each paper offers a unique contribution. It is our hope that they will be of interest to the field at large, providing new perspectives and fruitful new avenues to explore.

Happiness of Argentinian children living in vulnerable social contexts. The study presented by Carolina Greco and Mirta Ison explores one of the most innovative topics in the study of children's well-being and positive development: their understanding of the reasons for being happy. Using qualitative analysis techniques, results showed that most children in the sample perceived themselves to be happy. Authors also found that most of the children described their relationships with their families and friends as the main sources of their happiness. Moreover, it was found that activities, such as attending school and playing with friends and pets, were also reasons that children reported being happy. The findings presented in this article contribute to the study of positive development in children by shedding light on the possible reasons that explain feelings of happiness in children and the social dimensions that are associated with those feelings.

Understanding Chilean adolescents' prosociality. In their study, Christian Berger and Diego Palacios analyze the effect of context on children's positive development. By exploring the association between prosocial behavior, social status, and Machiavellianism among Chilean adolescents, these authors expand on the understanding of the effect that classrooms have as the social contexts in which interpersonal relationships unfold. Specifically, the study analyzed the effect of the classroom on prosocial behavior, Machiavellianism, and its associations with social status as a function of their quality (friendship network density and the degree of victimization among their members) and peer norms on prosocial behavior. Using hierarchical linear techniques, results showed that low levels of Machiavellianism and high scores of social status were positively associated with prosocial behavior. This study also revealed an important classroom effect: In classrooms with higher victimization rates the association between social preference and

prosocial behavior was enhanced. Conversely, classrooms with stronger social norms concerning prosocial behavior and sparser classroom friendship networks showed a weaker negative association between Machiavellianism and prosocial behavior.

Serenity in Argentinean children. Marina Cuello and Laura Oros analyze the concept of serenity. As these authors point out, serenity has been considered an indicator of children's well-being as it is a resource that enables children to manage life stressors and create positive relationships with others. This study explores two aspects of serenity: gender differences and its relationship with prosocial and aggressive behaviors. Results from this study revealed no differences between boys and girls in serenity scores. Furthermore, as expected, serenity was positively related to prosocial behaviors and negatively to physical and verbal aggression. In essence, evidence gathered in this study expands our comprehension of the relationship between serenity and well-being by shedding light on the associations between serenity and other dimensions of socio-emotional development. At the same time, it allows us to better understand differences in gender experiences related to serenity.

Socio-emotional development among 5-year-old children in Peru and Brazil. Magdalena Janus and her colleagues have strived to examine socio-emotional development of children in Peru and Brazil using a broad approach. Specifically, their aim was to demonstrate the importance of positive early experiences in the development of adaptive life trajectories. To do so, they used the early development instrument to identify specific socio-demographic characteristics that shape major developmental domains. The findings they present show that the domains of "approaches to learning" and "responsibility and respect" in combination with "readiness to explore new things" play a major role in understanding differences between children in social competence. However, they also provide details regarding potential risk factors to healthy social development. Specifically, poverty and maternal education were critical factors that policy makers should target in efforts to promote social competence among children. The article finishes by providing a nuanced overarching discussion of the various dimensions by which positive youth development may be fostered within the contexts of Brazil and Peru specifically but

also in Latin America as a whole.

Socio-emotional development of Brazilian gifted children. The work presented by Bartira S. Trancoso and Helga Loos-Sant'Ana explores the ways in which gifted pupils understand their development based on their perceptions of giftedness, their identity and self-beliefs, their academic performance, their social skills, and the expectations from their parents and teachers. In a descriptive manner, this work combines quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore children's perceptions of several aspects of their development. As the authors mention, these kinds of studies are extremely relevant in that they provide evidence-based indicators to understand the personal experiences of gifted children and help promote their positive development.

Reducing moral disengagement mechanisms. Andrea Bustamante and Enrique Chau present an applied perspective on positive development; they present the results of an empirical study that evaluated two intervention strategies intended to stop moral disengagement in adolescents. Using a sample of Colombian adolescents, the authors evaluated the program in classrooms that were randomly assigned to three

conditions: intervention based on critical thinking and social regulation, intervention based on persuasion and behavioral journalism, and a control group. Results revealed a significant reduction in moral justifications and in moral disengagement related to stealing for the critical thinking and social regulation intervention in comparison to the other two groups. These findings have important practical implications. A basic assumption of most intervention strategies is that by improving the quality of children's interactions, aspects like self-esteem or the general well-being of children are also benefited. In that sense, the fact that the empirical evidence presented here suggests that it is possible to reduce moral disengagement using school-based interventions, provides valuable information to practitioners and researchers that can inform prevention in school settings.

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