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### **Exploring Positive Psychology, Cultural, and Family Predictors of Latina/o Students' Psychological Grit**

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*A positive psychology, cultural, and family framework is useful to understand Latina/o college students' psychological grit. In the current study, we examined how presence of meaning in life, hope, gratitude, enculturation, and family importance influenced Mexican American students' grit. Using a multiple regression analysis, we found that hope predicted and accounted for 21% of the variance in psychological grit. A discussion regarding the importance of these findings and recommendations for future research and practice are provided.*

*Keywords: Positive Psychology, Mexican American students, psychological grit*

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### **Exploring Positive Psychology, Cultural, and Family Predictors of Latina/o Students' Psychological Grit**

It is well documented that the Latina/o population is one of the fastest growing groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Similar to other researchers (Vela, Lu, Lenz, & Hinojosa, 2015; Vela, Zamarripa, Balkin, Johnson, & Smith, 2014), we use Latina/o to refer to individuals who are associated with the following: Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Spanish, or other communities from Central or South America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Although college-readiness services have improved for the growing Latina/o population, researchers continue to find that Latina/o students pursue postsecondary education with individual, interpersonal, and institutional challenges (Cavazos, 2009; Malott, 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). While educational research regarding challenges is important, there is a dearth of literature regarding how positive psychology factors interact with family and cultural factors to influence Latina/o students. One of the most important constructs in the psychology and education literature is psychological grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Given that psychological grit is related to academic performance (Duckworth et al., 2007), teacher effectiveness (Robertson & Kraft, 2014), hope, and search for meaning in life (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015), investigating predictors of psychological grit among Latina/o college students is important. Findings from this study can help school personnel understand and potentially identify interventions, programs, and activities to improve those factors related to Latina/o students' grit.

In this study, we attempt to incorporate a framework that consists of empirically-related positive psychology, cultural, and family factors. The rationale for this conceptual framework was to

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determine which factors are associated with Latina/o students' psychological grit. We introduce this concept with a literature review of all the aforementioned factors. Then, we present quantitative findings from 110 Latina/o college students from a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Lastly, we conclude by emphasizing the importance of the findings, implications for practice, and implications for research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to move the field toward a greater understanding of Latina/o students' psychological grit, we use a positive psychology, family, and cultural framework to understand predictive factors. We agree with others (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015, 2016; Seligman, 2002) that a positive psychology framework can address students' grit given its emphasis on strengths, flourishing, and positive development. Positive psychology focuses on strengths that help individuals overcome challenges and allows researchers to understand factors that contribute to well-being, positive mental health, resilience, and human flourishing (Seligman, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). There are other focal points of positive psychology including: (a) how to be grateful for the past, (b) how to develop positive emotions about the present, and (c) how to develop optimism and hope about the future (Seligman, 2002). In addition to positive psychology, cultural and family factors are important to understand Latina/o students' psychological grit (Vela et al., 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to extend research with Latina/o students by focusing on how positive psychology, culture, and family influence psychological grit.

### **Positive Psychology Factors**

McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) defined gratitude as "a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains" (p. 112). Gratitude has important implications for students' physical health, academic achievement, and psychological well-being (Chaudhary, Jyoti, & Chaudhary, 2014; Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009; Lavelock et al., 2016; Vela, Sparrow, Ikonopoulou, Gonzalez, & Rodriguez, 2016; Young & Hutchinson, 2012). Gratitude has also been related to the sense of school belonging (Diebel, Woodcock, Cooper, & Brignell, 2016), personal and relational growth (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016), character strengths, hope, positive social relations, courage, humanity, and transcendence (Leontopoulou, 2015; O'Connell, Gallagher, & O'Shea, 2016). Additionally, meaning in life has the potential to influence subjective happiness, subjective well-being, and other positive development outcomes (Steger & Shin, 2010). Frankl (1963) postulated that meaning in life is a universal human drive to explore purpose in life. Steger and Shin (2010) conceptualized two components of meaning in life: presence of meaning in life (PML) and search for meaning in life (SML). While PML is the innate drive to designate meaning in one's life in the present as well as the future, search for meaning in life is the action of exploring such meaning (Steger & Shin, 2010). Researchers found that presence of meaning in life is related to individuals' ability to meaningfully experience life, work, and family to help establish meaning in life to cope with stress (Krok, 2016) and search for meaning in life is negatively related with psychological grit (Vela et al., 2015).

While gratitude and meaning in life focus on the past and present, hope is an important humanistic trait that focuses on the future and is commonly used to overcome obstacles in times of unpredictability (Snyder, 2002). Snyder (2002) defined hope as "a cognitive set comprising agency

and pathways to reach goals” (p. 250). While agency is belief toward capacity to initiate and sustain actions, pathways are beliefs in capacity to generate routes to accomplish those actions (Snyder, 2002). Researchers found that hope influences college students’ life satisfaction (Choma, Busseri, & Sadava, 2014; Hirschi, 2014), goal-seeking behaviors, resiliency, and academic performance (Adelabu, 2008). In addition, hope contributes to problem-solving strategies (Chang & Banks, 2007), goal setting (Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael, & Snyder, 2006), psychological grit, meaning in life (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015), and mental health (Marques et al., 2011). Finally, Chang, Yu, Chang, and Hirsch (2016) identified that hope was an important predictor of college students’ depressive and anxiety symptoms, providing additional evidence regarding the important relationship between perceptions of long-term pathways toward goals and mental health.

In summary, similar to other researchers, we agree that gratitude, meaning in life, and hope have been theoretically and empirically linked with college students’ academic and mental health outcomes. These important factors focus on positive emotions about the past, present, and future (Seligman, 2002). In addition to these positive psychology factors, including family and culture as part of a framework to understand Latina/o students’ psychological grit is important.

### **Family and Cultural Factors**

Researchers have consistently found that family support and importance influences Latina/o students’ positive mental health, meaning in life, and academic outcomes. Marin and Marin (1991) define *familiaismo* as feelings of loyalty to the nuclear and extended family unit. Family connectedness, including perceptions of family identity and family cohesion, are important factors of familiaismo (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012; Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). Several researchers have explored the role of family on Latina/o students’ academic and positive mental health outcomes. Vela, Lenz, Sparrow, Gonzalez, and Hinojosa (2015) examined the relationship among positive psychology and humanistic factors on Latina/o students’ vocational outcome expectations. Important predictors of vocational outcome expectations were perceptions of meaning in life and family importance. Other researchers found that family importance is related to high school and college students’ resilience (Cavazos et al., 2010), educational utility (Bravo, Umana-Taylor, Guimon, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2014), life satisfaction (Edwards & Lopez, 2006), and meaning in life. Although some Latina/o parents may not have post-secondary educational backgrounds, they can help their children learn about hard work and sustained effort to enhance development toward long-term goals.

In addition to family importance, enculturation to the Mexican culture has potential to play important roles in psychological grit for Latina/o college students. While enculturation refers to the degree in which individuals adhere to their Mexican heritage culture (Aguayo, Herman, Ojeda, & Flores, 2011), acculturation refers to a process of changing beliefs and behaviors (Flores, Ojeda, Huang, Gee, & Lee, 2006). Whereas acculturation was considered a linear process, researchers and educators looked at acculturation from a bi-dimensional perspective to understand that people relate to multiple cultures in unique ways (Berry, 1980; Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). There have been mixed research findings regarding the importance of acculturation and enculturation on Latina/o students’ educational and mental health experiences. Rivera, Chen, Flores, Blumberg, and Ponterotto (2007) examined the effects of perceived barriers, acculturation, and role-models with regard to career self-efficacy and career possibilities among Hispanic female community college students. Results suggest that acculturation to the Anglo culture contributed to greater levels of career self-efficacy with regard to female careers. Flores et al. (2006) looked at acculturation and career self-efficacy on academic goals among Mexican American students on the United States-Mexico border. Results

showed that orientation to the Anglo culture predicted high academic goals while orientation to the Mexican culture did not predict high academic goals. Finally, Lopez, Ehly, and Garcia-Vasquez (2002) explored how acculturation, social support, and academic achievement influenced Mexican and Mexican American high school students. They found that (a) students who scored integrated high and strongly Anglo oriented had higher academic achievement and (b) acculturation and gender accounted for 19% of the variance in academic achievement.

In summary, while researchers found that acculturation to the Anglo culture related to Mexican American students' career self-efficacy (Rivera, Chen, Flores, Blumberg, & Ponterotto, 2007) and Latina/o girls' career decision self-efficacy (Ojeda et al., 2011), other researchers highlighted benefits of enculturation to the Mexican culture such as enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) coursework (Vela et al., 2014) and educational persistence (Ojeda, Castillo, Meza, & Piña-Watson, 2013). More research needs to investigate how enculturation to the Mexican culture influence Latina/o students' psychological grit.

### **Psychological Grit**

An important factor in the psychology and education literature is psychological grit due to its relationship with academic outcomes and positive development (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals." Researchers found that psychological grit is related to academic performance, retention rate, performance (Duckworth et al., 2007), teacher effectiveness (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014), hope, and search for meaning in life (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). Duckworth et al. (2007) examined the influence of factors on grit among various populations such as undergraduate students, students in the National Spelling Bee, and West point cadets. They found that psychological grit influenced differences in success above and beyond the impact of IQ. Furthermore, in one of the few studies that examined psychological grit among Latina/o students, Vela, Lu, et al. (2015) looked at the impact of positive psychology and familial factors as predictors of psychological grit. They found that hope and search for meaning in life were related to Latina/o students' passion and perseverance for long-term goals. While higher levels of hope had a positive relationship with grit, higher levels of search for meaning in life had a negative relationship with grit. Given that psychological grit is also related to college students' positive affect and purpose commitment (Hill, Burrow, & Kendall, 2016), exploring predictors of this important construct among Latina/o students is important.

### **Purpose of Study**

Although some researchers investigated Latina/o college students' positive development, no study to date has used a positive psychology, cultural, and family framework to understand factors that impacts their grit. Researchers have found theoretical and empirical relationships among positive psychology, cultural, and family factors. However, these variables have been examined separately in other studies; researchers have not included these factors in a predictive model to determine which factors have the strongest influence on Latina/o students' psychological grit. Using positive psychology, cultural, and family factors in a single model is important given previous research pointing to separate relationships on Latina/o students' outcomes (e.g., Ojeda et al., 2011; Vela et al., 2015). As a result, we explored the following research question: to what extent do positive psychology, cultural, and family factors influence Latina/o college students' psychological grit?

## Method

### Participants

In the current study, criterion sampling was used to collect data. The research team identified large undergraduate courses from which Latina/o participants could be recruited. One-hundred-ten students, who were enrolled at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), were in the sample. The HSI had enrollment of approximately 28,000 undergraduate and graduate students (approximately 90% of students are of Mexican decent). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 56 ( $M = 22.41$ ;  $STD = 5.56$ ). This sample included 60 women and 40 men who self-identified as Latina/o, Mexican, or Latina/o ethnic identities. The average grade point average was 2.93.

### Measurements

**Gratitude.** The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) measures participants' perceptions of tendency to feel gratitude. Participants responded to items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (7) *strongly agree* to (1) *strongly disagree*. A sample item includes: "As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history." Reliability coefficients in previous studies range from .81 to .89). For this study, Cronbach's alpha was .86.

**Meaning in Life.** The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) measures perceptions of meaning in life. Participants responded to statements ranging from (1) *absolutely untrue* to *absolutely true* (7). A sample item for the presence subscale includes, "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose." A sample item for the search subscale includes, "I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant." Reliability coefficients range from .83 to .93 (e.g., Dunn & O'Brien, 2009; Park et al., 2010). For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .88 on the presence subscale and .83 on the search subscale.

**Hope.** The Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991) measures perceptions of goals and objectives. Participants responded to statements ranging from *definitely true* (8) to *definitely false* (1). A sample response item includes, "I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me." Reliability coefficients range from .81 to .84 (e.g., Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .84.

**Family importance.** The Pan-Hispanic Familism scale (Villarreal et al., 2005) measures perceptions of family importance. Participants responded to statements ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). A sample response item includes, "My family is always there for me in times of need." Reliability coefficients in previous studies range from .87 to .93 (e.g., Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). For this study, Cronbach's alpha was .93.

**Enculturation.** The Brief Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-II (Bauman, 2005) measures orientation to the Anglo culture and orientation to the Mexican culture. We used the orientation to the Mexican culture subscale in the current study. Participants responded to statements ranging from *almost always* (5) to *not at all* (0). A sample item includes, "I enjoy speaking Spanish." Reliability estimates range from .91 to .93 (Bauman, 2005; Castillo, Lopez-Arenas, & Saldivar, 2010). For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .92.

**Psychological Grit.** The Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) measures perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Participants responded to statements ranging from *very much like me*

(5) to *not at all like me* (1). A sample response item includes, “I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.” Reliability estimates range from .73 to .86 (; Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Ericsoon, 2011; Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). For this study, Cronbach’s alpha was .93.

## Procedures

First, we obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board at a HSI in the Southern region of the United States. Second, the research team contacted professors from Introduction to Psychology and Education courses to request participation. Data collection spanned over four days from two Introduction to Psychology courses as well as two Education courses. Third, we informed participants that participation was voluntary and would not affect their grade or affiliation with the university. We also informed students that extra credit or other incentives were not available for participation. Questionnaires were administered during class instruction time. Finally, scores from all data were compiled and entered into SPSS for statistical analyses (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015).

## Data Analysis

We modeled relationships between predictor and criterion variables using a simultaneous multiple regression model, which is the appropriate statistical analysis when researchers predict a continuous variable based on other predictor variables (Dimitrov, 2013; Vela, Lu, et al., 2015). We used multiple regression to evaluate our research question related to the degree that positive psychology, cultural, and family factors predicted psychological grit.

## Results

Descriptive statistics, including Pearson R correlation coefficients, are included in Table 1. In addition to examining correlation coefficients, we evaluated multicollinearity among predictor variables by inspecting variance inflation factors. The low variance inflation factors within the acceptable range revealed that using a model with these predictor variables was acceptable (Vela, Lu, et al., 2016). The regression analysis estimating the influence of predictor variables on grit yielded a statistically significant model,  $F(6, 103) = 16.21, p < .001, R^2 = .49$ , indicative of a large effect size in which model predictors account for approximately 49% of the change among scores estimating grit (see Table 2). After establishing the overall statistical significance of  $R^2$  and the multiple regression equation, we examined the statistical significance of regression coefficients for significant predictors (Dimitrov, 2013). Hope was the only factor that had a unique contribution to the explanation of variance in grit (see Table 2), uniquely accounting for approximately 21% of the variance. Search for meaning in life, enculturation, family importance, presence of meaning in life, and gratitude did not predict grit.

## Discussion

The current study contributes to our understanding of psychological grit in Latina/o college students by exploring the relationship among positive psychology, culture, and family in a multidimensional manner. Perhaps the most important finding was that the predictive model accounted for 49% of the variance in Latina/o students’ grit. Researchers (Ojeda et al., 2011; Ojeda,

Edwards, Hardin, & Pina-Watson, 2014; Vela, Lu, et al., 2015) used other models (e.g., ecological, positive psychology) to understand Latina/o students' academic and mental health outcomes and explained 20-30% of the variance. Findings from the current study suggest that professional counselors and college personnel should address hope in order to influence Latina/o students' passion and perseverance for long-term goals. Although not all positive psychology, family, and cultural factors predicted grit, researchers could use other factors as part of a framework to examine Latina/o students' passion for long-term goals. Further, hope served as the strongest predictor of Latina/o college students' psychological grit, accounting for 21% of the variance in the model. This finding suggests that as the amount of hope increases, the level of Latina/o students' grit increases as well. Findings from this study build on findings from previous researchers who found that hope was related to vocational outcome expectations, meaning in life, academic achievement, and mental health. Hope refers to beliefs and values to pursue objectives and goals (Feldman & Dreher, 2012) as well as confidence to achieve those goals (Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999). When Latina/o students have hope that they can create a positive future, their level of passion and perseverance for long-term goals might increase. Given the strong, predictive relationship between hope and grit, we suggest that counselors and teachers help Latina/o students improve hope, which might also influence their perseverance and effort toward long-term goals.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on findings from the current study, it is imperative that school counselors and teachers strive to increase students hope in order to facilitate grit. The results showed that among postsecondary Latina/o students, hope was the strongest predictor of psychological grit. There are several implications for practice that need to be considered. First, counselors need to facilitate workshops where students and parents learn how hope and grit are interdependent and how increased levels of these factors lead to better academic outcomes (Duckworth et al., 2007). A psycho-educational class would not only enlighten students and parents on the importance of these factors but also has potential to make them more accepting of school interventions that look to increase these factors. Second, counselors can use motivational interviewing or motivational presentations to increase students' hope at the beginning of each school year for all high school Hispanic students. Counselors can organize and facilitate this event and school administration can make these annual presentations mandated. To increase effectiveness, counselors could perhaps implement different presentations for 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Finally, given that Latina/o high school and college students face individual, interpersonal, and institutional challenges, we recommend that high school counselors and first-year college professors help students process and reflect on how these challenges could influence their hope and sustained effort toward long-term goals. We contend that school personnel can help Latina/o students identify ways in which they coped with adverse experiences and make meaning from these experiences (White & Epston, 1990).

### **Implications for Research**

There are several directions for future research to focus on Latina/o students' grit and hope. First, outcome-based research to explore the impact of programs, interventions, or techniques with Latina/o high school and college students is warranted. Researchers should use single-case research designs (Lenz, 2015) to explore the impact of counseling and/or psycho-educational interventions to increase Latina/o students' hope and grit. Possible interventions include narrative therapy

(Ikonomopoulos, Schmidt, & Smith, 2015), positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), solution-focused therapy, and creative journal arts therapy (Vela, Ikonomopoulos, Dell A'Quila, & Vela, 2016). Second, researchers should recruit larger sample sizes (e.g., over 300) to use structural equation modeling with factors from the current study. Researchers could determine how positive psychology, family, and cultural factors mediate or moderate the relationship on Latina/o students' grit. Fourth, most research focuses on Latina/o college students and although these studies provided incredible insight, studies examining Latina/o high school or community college students' grit are important. Additionally, researchers should use Martin Seligman's positive psychology model (i.e., PERMA) to explore how positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments influence students' grit. Researchers can test the efficacy of the PERMA model with Latina/o students and other culturally-diverse groups. Finally, family importance has been associated with Latina/o students' resilience, goal-assessment hope, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness (Cavazos et al., 2009; Vela, Lerma, et al., 2014; Vela, Lu, et al., 2016; Zalaquett, 2006). Since family importance did not influence Latina/o students' grit in the current study, researchers should continue to examine the lack of relationship between family and students' perseverance and passion for long-term goals.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations that warrant consideration. First, similar to other researchers (Vela, Lerma, et al., 2014; Vela, Lu, et al., 2015), we relied on cross-sectional data with a small sample from a HSI. Researchers should use longitudinal data to make causal inferences and recruit larger sample sizes from different institutions in order to use sophisticated statistical analyses. Second, instruments measuring positive psychology constructs in the current study have not been validated with Latina/o college students. Additionally, participants in the current study attended a HSI with 90% Latina/o students, which means that findings might not generalize to other schools or areas where Latina/o students are not the ethnic majority (Vela, Lu, et al., 2015).

### **Conclusion**

The findings point to the importance of exploring how positive psychology, cultural, and family factors are associated with Latina/o college students' grit. School counselors and teachers can benefit Latina/o college students by becoming aware of interventions and techniques to increase Mexican American students' hope in order to influence grit. Researchers also could examine other factors to strengthen the emerging framework for predicting Latina/o students' positive development outcomes.

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Table 1  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Predictor Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Hope	50.73	7.58	—	.66	.61	-.03	.15	.44
2. Presence	26.49	6.22	—	—	.54	.01	.14	.45
3. Gratitude	35.11	5.87	—	—	—	-.07	.01	.55
4. Search	26.36	6.20	—	—	—	—	-.03	.02
5. MOS	18.67	7.09	—	—	—	—	—	.17
6. Family	21.11	4.39	—	—	—	—	—	—

Table 2

*Multiple Regression Results for Psychological Grit*

Variable	B	SEB	B	t	p	sr2
Hope	.38	.11	.53	5.11	.000***	.21
Meaning in Life	.11	.09	.13	1.27	.21	.01
Gratitude	.14	.09	.16	1.57	.12	.01
Family	-.06	.11	-.05	-5.36	.59	.001
Search	.006	.06	.007	.10	.92	.001
MOS	-.02	.06	-.02	-.30	.77	.001

\*\*\* &lt; .001