Research article

The relation between ethnic group attachment and prosocial tendencies: The mediating role of cultural values

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Abstract

Studies suggest that Mexican–American youths who feel attached to their ethnic group engage in more prosocial behaviors. However, the psychological mechanisms that account for this association are not clear. Drawing on social identity and self-categorization theories, we examined whether the association between ethnic group attachment and tendencies to engage in six distinct types of prosocial behaviors was mediated by familism and Mainstream American values among Mexican American youths. Ethnic group attachment, familism, Mainstream American values, and prosocial tendencies were assessed among 207 Mexican–American early adolescents using an interview format. Latent variable path models showed that ethnic group attachment was associated with greater tendencies to engage in compliant, emotional, dire, and anonymous helping, and that each of these associations was at least partially mediated by greater familism values. Mainstream American values were related to greater tendencies to engage in public prosocial behavior and less altruistic behavior, but did not mediate the associations between ethnic group attachment and prosocial tendencies. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are addressed. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Several scholars contend that feeling attached to one’s ethnic group can facilitate positive behavioral outcomes among Mexican–American adolescents (Casas & Pyluk, 1995; Knight, Bernal, & Carlo, 1995; Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993; Phinney, 1993). In support of this contention, some studies have shown that Mexican–Americans who feel more attached to their ethnic group engage in more cooperative and prosocial behaviors (i.e., behaviors intended to help another person; Knight, Cota, & Bernal, 1993; Schwartz, Zamoonga, & Jarvis, 2007). Although this relationship has been demonstrated, the psychological mechanisms through which attachment to one’s ethnic group may produce prosocial behaviors are not clear. In order to address this issue, the present study examines the associations between ethnic group attachment, core cultural values (i.e., familism and Mainstream American values), and tendencies to engage in six distinct types of prosocial behaviors among Mexican–American early adolescents. Based on social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), we test a model in which ethnic group attachment facilitates some prosocial tendencies via the internalization of familism, but not Mainstream American values.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that the self-concept is composed of a personal identity (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about one’s personal characteristics) and a variety of social identities (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the social groups to which one belongs and one’s membership in those groups). According to this theory, social perception and behavior are influenced by the identity that is cognitively activated within a given situation (Turner et al., 1987). A particular social identity becomes cognitively activated within a given situation when the group that defines that identity is made salient, either by situational cues that implicate that identity or personal tendencies to view oneself as a member of that group. Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987) elaborates on these ideas and posits that activating a social identity increases the tendency to self-stereotype, which involves perceptions of oneself as being more similar to a stereotypic or prototypic member of one’s group. Self-stereotyping, in turn, increases the tendency to adopt group norms and engage in behaviors that are consistent with them; that is, group values, beliefs, and expectations become the guiding force for decision-making and behavior (Lemay & Ashmore, 2004; see also Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Importantly, a particular social identity is more likely to become activated among individuals who feel a strong, committed, positive attachment to the group that defines that social identity (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999; Turner et al., 1987), because that social identity represents a central aspect of their sense of self and is thus more cognitively accessible (Higgins, 1996). These theories suggest that Mexican–Americans who feel attached to their ethnic group are more likely to ascribe to Mexican–American values and to behave in a manner that is consistent with them, including those that promote prosocial behaviors.

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Received 26 September 2008, Accepted 13 January 2010
Familism values, which refer to a set of norms related to family solidarity, emotional and economic interdependence, and role flexibility within an extended network of genetic and fictive kin (Marín, 1984; Munoz & Endo, 1982; Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, & Marín, 1987) represent a core aspect of traditional Mexican–American culture (Alvirez & Bean, 1976; Carlo, Knight, McGinley, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, in press; Moore, 1970). Knight and his colleagues (in press) suggested that familism values are reflected in feelings of obligation to one’s family, considering one’s family as a primary source of social and emotional support, and viewing one’s family as an important reference group in decision-making processes. To our knowledge, no published studies have directly examined the association between familism values and prosocial behaviors. Nonetheless, conceptually, we expect familism values to promote prosocial behaviors as they may encourage an awareness, consideration, and responsiveness to the needs of others, which can facilitate prosocial traits and behaviors (Carlo & de Guzman, 2009). In line with social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), studies have shown that Mexican–Americans and members of other Latino groups who feel attached to their ethnic group also report greater endorsement of familism values (Gaines et al., 1997; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007; Umaña-Taylor, Alfarro, Bámaca, & Guimond, 2009). Thus, we predicted that Mexican–American adolescents who feel a greater attachment to their ethnic group would demonstrate more prosocial tendencies due to the endorsement of familism values.

A growing body of evidence suggests that prosocial behaviors differ along several dimensions and have different correlates (e.g., Eberly & Montemayor, 1998; Iannotti, 1985). For example, Carlo and Randall (2002) reliably identified six distinct prosocial tendencies, including the tendency to help when asked (compliant), in emotionally evocative situations (emotional), in emergency situations (dire), in public settings (public), anonymously (anonymous), and for the sake of helping without expectation of reward (altruism). More importantly, Carlo and his colleagues also have shown significant heterogeneity in the correlates of these prosocial tendencies (e.g., Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003; Carlo & Randall, 2002; McGinley & Carlo, 2007). Likewise, familism values may be differentially associated with particular prosocial tendencies. Specifically, feeling obligated to one’s family, taking one’s family into consideration when making important decisions, and providing and receiving support within the family each involve some degree of perspective taking, which has been associated with compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial tendencies (Carlo et al., 2003). Thus, we expect familism values to be positively associated with compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial tendencies. The associations between familism values and public, anonymous, and altruistic prosocial tendencies are less clear. On one hand, it is possible that familism values promote tendencies to help regardless of contextual variations (e.g., in public vs. in private) or personal costs (i.e., altruistic helping vs. other types of helping). On the other hand, there does not appear to be anything inherent in familism values that would promote helping specifically when others are around (i.e., public), when there is no real or symbolic reward (i.e., private), or when there is a great cost to oneself (i.e., altruism). Thus, we examined the associations of familism values with public, anonymous, and altruistic prosocial tendencies without firm a priori hypotheses.

Given our prediction that ethnic group attachment facilitates prosocial tendencies via familism values, we predicted that ethnic group attachment also would be positively associated with compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial tendencies and that familism values would mediate these associations. However, social identity suggests that ethnic group attachment also may be related to these prosocial tendencies for other reasons. For example, positive ingroup attachments may help fulfill a host of psychological needs (Fiske, 2003; Pittman & Zeigler, 2007), such as favorable self-evaluations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and feelings of certainty (Hogg, 2007), which also may facilitate prosocial behaviors (Staub, 2005). As such, we expected familism to only partially mediate the associations between ethnic group attachment and compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial tendencies. At the same time, ethnic group attachment may be associated with greater anonymous, public, and altruistic prosocial tendencies as a result of the other psychological outcomes associated with feeling attached to one’s group (i.e., needs fulfillment); thus, we expected ethnic group attachment to have positive associations with the prosocial tendencies over and above the indirect associations.

In addition to being exposed to the values of their heritage culture, Mexican–Americans in the United States are exposed to and may internalize the values of the Mainstream American society. According to Knight et al. (in press), Mexican–American adolescents and adults consider Mainstream American values to consist of preference for material success, independence and self-reliance, and competition and personal achievement (cf. Hofstede, 1983; Triandis, 1995). Theoretically, Mainstream American values also may promote some prosocial behaviors. Specifically, helping in public situations can serve as a means to bolster one’s social status and thus may be more commonly endorsed by individuals who hold Mainstream American values. In addition, helping others at a cost to oneself but without expectation of a reward (i.e., altruistic helping) is inconsistent with the values of material success embedded within Mainstream American values. The association of Mainstream American values to compliant, emotional, dire, and private prosocial tendencies is less clear. One on hand, these types of behaviors appear to be inconsistent with Mainstream American values; for example, helping in emergency situations will not necessarily facilitate the accomplishment of personal goals. On the other hand, it is possible that these prosocial behaviors do bring about some personal reward; for example, helping in emergency situations can reduce personal distress aroused by witnessing someone in need.

Although Mainstream American values may promote some prosocial behaviors, social identity and self-categorization theories suggest that ethnic group attachment is not likely to facilitate the activation or internalization of such values; rather, Mainstream American values are more dependent on national identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Thus, we did not expect Mainstream American values to mediate the associations between ethnic group attachment and the prosocial tendencies. As already noted, however, individuals who feel attached to their ethnic group tend to
fare better psychologically, which may facilitate the internalization of positive values more generally, including Mainstream American values. Thus, it is possible that ethnic group attachment will be associated with greater Mainstream American values. The present study provides an important test of this possibility.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and seven Mexican–American early adolescents from the Southwestern region of the United States participated in this study. This sample consisted of 105 females (51%) and 102 males (49%) with an average age of 10.91 years ($SD = .84$). Sixty-two (30%) of the children were born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States. Of the children born in the United States, 110 (54%) had parents who were both born in Mexico, 14 (7%) had one parent born in Mexico and another born in the United States or elsewhere, 13 (6%) had parents who were both born in the United States but at least one grandparent born in Mexico, and 7 (3%) had no parents or grandparents born in Mexico. Of the 204 mothers reporting education status, 3 (2%) had received no formal education, 40 (20%) had attended or completed elementary school, 75 (37%) had attended or completed junior high school, 30 (15%) had attended but not completed high school, 19 (9%) had completed high school or GED equivalent, and 37 (18%) had received some form of post-secondary education.

Procedure

As part of a larger study examining the role of parenting and cultural factors in prosocial and moral development, take-home recruitment letters were distributed to 5th and 6th grade children at eight public elementary schools in a Southwestern metropolitan area. The letters described the study and requested permission to contact the family by telephone with further information. Schools provided contact information for each child that returned a signed permission form. These families were then contacted by telephone by trained screeners/recruiters, who provided further information about the study, determined eligibility, and scheduled at-home interview sessions with interested families. Families were deemed eligible for the study if the child was a 5th or 6th grade student in one of the targeted schools, had either a primarily Mexican/Mexican–American ethnic background, lived at least 50% of the time with the mother to be interviewed, had no severe developmental disabilities, and was proficient in English.

Interviews were conducted in the families’ homes by advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Each interviewer successfully completed a 30-hour training course in field data collection procedures prior to their first interview. Thirteen (76%) of the 17 interviewers were female. Eight (47%) reported that their ethnicity was Mexican or Mexican–American, seven (41%) described themselves as European–American, and 2 (12%) self-identified as other. To ensure that the interviews were not interrupted or otherwise influenced by other family members, attempts were made to choose locations that were out of visual and auditory range of other individuals in the home. All children were interviewed in English. Survey questions and response options were read aloud by the interviewer and structured English and Spanish definitions were provided as needed for a limited number of troublesome words and phrases. Completion of the full survey battery required approximately 1–2 hours. The child received $25 for participating in the study.

Measures

Prosocial tendencies were assessed with the prosocial tendencies measure-revised (PTM-R; Carlo et al., 2003; Knight et al., in press). The PTM-R was developed to order to assess tendencies to engage in six different types of prosocial behaviors commonly discussed and examined within the prosocial literature (Carlo & Randall, 2001), including compliant (two items; e.g., “When people ask you to help them, you don’t hesitate”), emotional (five items; e.g., “Emotional situations make you want to help others in need”), dire (three items; e.g., “You tend to help people who are in a real crisis or need”), anonymous (four items; e.g., “You tend to help others in need when they do not know who helped them”), public (three items; e.g., “You get the most out of helping others when it is done in front of other people”), and altruism (three items; e.g., “You often help even if you don’t think you will get anything out of helping”). One of the altruism items was not included because it was not deemed to be age appropriate (i.e., “One of the best things about doing charity work is that it looks good on my resume”). For these items, participants indicated the degree to which the scale items described them on a 5-point scale, anchored by 1 (not at all) and 5 (greatly).

Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha$) reliability coefficients for the subscales in the present study were .51 (compliant), .76 (emotional), .69 (dire), .75 (anonymous), .78 (public), and .42 (altruism). The low reliabilities for compliant and altruistic prosocial tendencies are not unusual for scales with few items. In addition, research has provided evidence of the equivalence of the factor structure and construct validity relations of this measure among Mexican–American and European–American early adolescents (Carlo et al., in press; see also Carlo & Randall, 2002).

Ethnic group attachment was assessed with the affirmation, belonging and commitment subscale of the multigroup ethnic identity measure (MEIM; Roberts et al., 1999; see also Phinney, 1992). This subscale measures an individual’s sense of belonging and commitment to and positive attitudes towards one’s ethnic group. For this measure, participants responded to seven items, such as “I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group,” on a 5-point scale, anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). This scale has been used extensively with Mexican–Americans and other Latino groups and has had acceptable reliability in other studies (e.g., Armenta, 2010; Romero & Roberts, 2003). This scale also had acceptable reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .83$). 

Mexican–American values were assessed with the familism and Mainstream American values subscales of the Mexican–American cultural values scale (MACVS; Knight et al., in
The MACVS is a values-based measure of the dual cultural adaptation of Mexican–American adolescents and adults. The items were created based on a series of focus groups in which Mexican–American adolescents and their parents discussed perceptions of key values associated with the Mexican/Mexican–American and Mainstream American cultures. Analyses of data from two large, diverse samples of Mexican–American adolescents and adults supported the expected factor structure, reliability, and construct validity of the subscales (Knight et al., in press). Familism values were assessed with three subscales, including family support and emotional closeness (six items; e.g., “It is important to have close relationships with aunts/uncles, grandparents, and cousins”; α = .68), family obligations (five items; e.g., “Older kids should take care of and be role models for their younger brothers and sisters”; α = .60), and family as referent (five items; e.g., “A person should always think about their family when making important decisions”; α = .64). Mainstream American values were also assessed with three subscales, including self-reliance (five items; e.g., “As children get older their parents should allow them to make their own decisions”; α = .53), material success (five items; e.g., “Money is the key to happiness”; α = .77), and competition and personal achievement (four items; e.g., “Personal achievements are the most important things in life”; α = .59). Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they believed each statement on a 5-point scale, anchored by 1 (not at all) and 5 (completely). Initial analyses showed high correlations, particularly given the attenuation produced by the modest internal consistency coefficients, among the familism subscales (i.e., the correlations ranged from .58 to .67) and Mainstream American subscales (i.e., the correlations ranged from .37 to .47). Moreover, analytical attempts to treat the familism subscales and Mainstream American subscales as separate variables were compromised (e.g., non-positive definitive matrices) by the colinearity among each set of subscales. For these reasons, and to maintain consistency with the original conceptualization of the scale (Knight et al., in press), we examined familism and Mainstream American values as higher-order latent constructs based on the respective subscales. A confirmatory factor analysis with the familism and Mainstream American items showed the higher-order construct model to be a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 [399] = 480.75, p < .01, \chi^2/df = 1.20, \text{RMSEA} = .03, \text{SRMR} = .07$). Single composite scores based on all of the familism (α = .84) and Mainstream American (α = .79) items were used for preliminary univariate and bivariate analyses as a proxy for the higher-order latent variables.

### RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are shown in Table 1. In general, participants were moderately attached to their ethnic group. They also endorsed familism values more highly than they endorsed Mainstream American values ($t[203] = 34.17, p < .001$). These young adolescents were moderate to high in all six prosocial tendencies; they were highest in compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial tendencies and showed slightly less anonymous, public, and altruistic prosocial tendencies. Correlation analyses showed that feeling attached to one’s ethnic group was significantly associated with greater familism values but not Mainstream American values. In addition, ethnic group attachment and familism values each were positively associated with compliant, emotional, dire, and anonymous prosocial tendencies and non-significantly related to public and altruistic prosocial tendencies. Further, Mainstream American values were positively associated with public and anonymous prosocial tendencies, negatively associated with altruistic prosocial tendencies, and non-significantly associated with compliant, emotional, or dire prosocial tendencies.

Mplus Version 3.01 (Muthén & Muthén, 2004) was used to estimate two path models. Scale and subscale items were used as indicators of latent factors for each construct and the three familism and three Mainstream American values factors were used as indicators of higher-order familism and Mainstream American factors, respectively. A preliminary model was tested in which we examined the direct (i.e., unmediated)

### Table 1. Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Ethnic group attachment</th>
<th>Cultural values</th>
<th>Prosocial tendencies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Familism</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethic group attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Familism</td>
<td>.51*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream American</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.21*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prosocial tendencies</td>
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<td>.41*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliant</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>.38*</td>
<td>.41*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dire</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td>4.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.43</td>
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</table>

*p ≤ .01.
association of ethnic group attachment to the six prosocial tendencies. The residual variances for the six prosocial tendencies were allowed to correlate in this model. We then tested our focal model in which familism and Mainstream American values were included as mediators of the associations between ethnic group attachment and the six correlated prosocial tendencies. Maximum likelihood with robust standard errors was used to estimate these models and RMSEA, SRMR, and $\chi^2/df$ values were used to determine model fit. Based on simulation studies examining Type I and Type II error rates, Hu and Bentler (1999) suggested that a RMSEA value less than or equal to .06 and SRMR value less than or equal to .09 represents one criteria indicating that the model is a good fit to the data. In addition, Kline (1998) suggested that adequate fit with complex models is indicated by a $\chi^2/df$ ratio that is less than 2. Follow-up tests of the indirect (i.e., mediated) associations between ethnic group attachment and prosocial tendencies via familism and Mainstream American values were conducted using a distribution of products test in which the $Z$ statistics for the associations that make up an indirect effect are multiplied (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). Significance is tested using critical values derived from a theoretical distribution of the product of two normally distributed variables (e.g., $Z_{.05} = 1.645$).

The preliminary model including only direct paths between ethnic group attachment and the six prosocial tendencies fit the data well [$\chi^2(303) = 414.02, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.37, \text{RMSEA} = .04, \text{SRMR} = .06$]. Consistent with the correlation analyses, ethnic group attachment was positively associated with compliant ($\beta = .67, Z = 4.77$), emotional ($\beta = .46, Z = 4.61$), and anonymous prosocial tendencies ($\beta = .26, Z = 2.24$), and was not significantly associated with public ($\beta = .14, Z = 1.59$) or altruistic ($\beta = -.05, Z = -.48$) prosocial tendencies. Initial estimation of the focal model that included the value mediators produced a non-positive definite matrix because the family obligation factor had a loading greater than 1 on the higher-order familism factor. This was accounted for by fixing the residual variance for the family obligation factor to zero. The resulting model fit the data well, [$\chi^2(1499) = 1947.42, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.30, \text{RMSEA} = .04, \text{SRMR} = .08$]. The bold standardized parameter estimates in Figure 1 are the paths coefficients that were statistically significant at or below the $p = .05$ level. The paths with italicized coefficients were included in the model test but were not statistically significant. Feeling attached to one’s ethnic group was associated with higher familism values but was not significantly associated with Mainstream American values. In addition, familism was positively associated with compliant, emotional, dire, and anonymous prosocial tendencies but was not significantly associated with public or altruistic prosocial tendencies. Moreover, Mainstream American values were positively associated with public prosocial tendencies, negatively associated with altruistic prosocial tendencies, and not significantly associated with compliant, emotional, dire, or anonymous prosocial tendencies.

The distribution of products test showed that the indirect associations between ethnic group attachment and compliant, emotional, dire, and anonymous prosocial tendencies via familism values were significant ($\beta_s = .21, .20, .27,$ and $.26$, respectively, $Z_s = 11.72, 12.80, 17.06, \text{and} 14.17$, respectively). Finally, even after taking familism and Mainstream American values into consideration, the associations of ethnic group attachment to compliant and emotional prosocial tendencies remained significant, suggesting that familism values did not fully mediate these associations. The total, direct, and indirect effect sizes are reported in Table 2.

Figure 1. The relation of ethnic group attachment to prosocial tendencies mediated by familism and Mainstream American values.
Table 2. Direct, indirect, and total effects of ethnic group attachment on global and differentiated prosocial tendencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Compliant</th>
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<th>Dire</th>
<th>Anonymous</th>
<th>Public</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>.20</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.27*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Via Mainstream American values</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect</td>
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<td>.46*</td>
<td>.48*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.05</td>
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</table>

*p ≤ .05.

DISCUSSION

The present findings are consistent with the limited empirical evidence suggesting that feeling attached to one’s ethnic group can promote cooperative and prosocial behavior among Mexican–American adolescents (Knight et al., 1993; Schwartz, Zamoonga, & Jarvis, 2007). More importantly, the present study extends previous research by examining the association of ethnic group attachment to tendencies to engage in specific types of prosocial behaviors and by considering whether core Mexican–American cultural values (i.e., familism and Mainstream American values) account for these associations. Consistent with our predictions, Mexican–American early adolescents who felt more positively attached to their ethnic group showed greater tendencies to engage in compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial behaviors, and that familism values, but not Mainstream American values, at least partially mediated these associations; specifically, ethnic group attachment was positively associated with familism values, which were in turn positively associated with compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial tendencies. Ethic group attachment also was associated with greater anonymous prosocial tendencies and this relation was partially mediated by familism values. Finally, as expected, ethnic group attachment was not significantly associated with endorsement of Mainstream American values but these values nonetheless were linked to greater public prosocial tendencies and less altruistic prosocial tendencies.

Our results are consistent with social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), which posit that individuals who feel more strongly attached to their group are more likely to have that group identity become cognitively activated within a given situation, which can lead to views of oneself as an undifferentiated member of one’s group. Specifically, in this study, Mexican–American early adolescents who felt attached to their ethnic group showed greater endorsement of familism values, which represents a core aspect of Mexican and Mexican–American cultures (Alvirez & Bean, 1976; Knight et al., in press; Moore, 1970). In contrast, ethnic group attachment was not significantly associated with Mainstream American values, which is likely to be promoted instead by attachment to their nationality (i.e., “American” identity; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, those Mexican–American early adolescents who felt more strongly attached to their ethnic group most resembled, in terms of familism values, a prototypical member of their ethnic group (Turner et al., 1987). Moreover, our results suggest that, among Mexican–American early adolescents, the adoption of familism values may be one mechanism through which ethnic group attachment promotes some prosocial tendencies.

The associations of ethnic group attachment to compliant and emotional prosocial tendencies were not fully mediated by familism values. This is consistent with our predictions drawn from social identity theory, which posits that a positive social identity may have a number of positive psychological outcomes, such as higher self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and a greater sense of personal control (Hogg, 2007), both of which may facilitate prosocial behaviors. In contrast, the associations of ethnic group attachment to dire and anonymous prosocial tendencies were fully mediated by familism values, suggesting that these values may be a key psychological mechanism through which ethnic group attachment facilitates these forms of prosocial behaviors. Self-esteem and feelings of personal control also may play a role in accounting for these associations and a fuller understanding of the associations between ethnic group attachment and prosocial tendencies will require fuller consideration of these possibilities.

Importantly, the Mexican–American early adolescents who more strongly endorsed familism values had greater tendencies to engage in those prosocial behaviors that appear to be facilitated by perspective taking skills (i.e., compliant, emotional, and dire; Carlo et al., 2003), which may result from everyday experiences with familism values (e.g., considering the needs of others). Those who more strongly endorsed Mainstream American values were more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors that may facilitate the attainment of personal goals (i.e., public) and were less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors that have a clear cost to oneself without the expectation of a reward (i.e., altruism). In addition, those who strongly endorsed either familism or Mainstream American values had greater tendencies to engage in anonymous prosocial behavior; that is, the tendency to help when one’s identity is not known to others. It may be that both sets of culturally related values encourage anonymous prosocial behaviors. For example, helping anonymously may be viewed positively within Mexican–American families, given that such helping is consistent with the values of humility and/or collectivism, both of which are also commonly recognized characteristics of Mexican culture (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Suizzo, 2007). At the same time, helping anonymously may increase one’s personal feeling of self-esteem and sense of personal control; thus, Mainstream American values may increase anonymous prosocial tendencies because of the personal reward gained by engaging in such behavior. It should
be noted that the association between Mainstream American values and anonymous prosocial tendencies reduced to a non-significant level when familism was taken into consideration. Given that this is the first study to examine these values in relation to anonymous prosocial tendencies, future studies will need to replicate this finding and further examine the mechanisms that may underlie this relationship.

These findings also suggest that, among Mexican–American early adolescents, maintaining ties to one’s ethnic group and the cultural values of that group are associated with socially desirable behavioral tendencies (i.e., prosocial tendencies). Thus, although Mexican–American youths experience many problems within the broader community as the result of their adherence to the traditional cultural values of their ethnic group (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), these findings suggest that the maintenance of these values can also be beneficial, both for the individual as well as society. Consequently, one potential cost of pressures for Mexican–Americans to assimilate to the Mainstream American culture, such as through English only initiatives within the educational system, is an inadvertent reduction of behavioral tendencies to engage in some types of prosocial behaviors that can serve a positive function within society. This is not to suggest that adopting Mainstream American values necessarily will reduce Mexican–Americans’ tendencies to engage in all prosocial behaviors; indeed, our results also showed that Mainstream American values promoted public prosocial behaviors and do not result in lower compliant, emotional, dire, and anonymous prosocial behaviors. Rather, our study suggests that there may be greater utility promoting a multiethnic and multicultural identity among Mexican–American early adolescents. Consistent with this argument, other research suggests that valuing both one’s heritage culture as well as one’s host culture is associated with a number of positive psychological and behavioral outcomes among Mexican–Americans and other Latino groups (e.g., Zamboanga, Raffaelli, & Horton, 2006). These findings make clear that scholars, policy makers, and the general public alike need to further consider the costs and benefits in promoting assimilationism, rather than multiculturalism, ideologies, and goals among Mexican–Americans.

Our study also contributes to the growing body of research suggesting that prosocial behaviors are better conceptualized as a multidimensional construct rather than a global one (e.g., Carlo et al., 2003; Carlo & Randall, 2001; Eberly & Montemayor, 1998; Iamott, 1985; McGinley & Carlo, 2007). The differential association of ethnic group attachment, familism values, and Mainstream American values to the six prosocial tendencies supports the multidimensionality perspective.1 Our findings clearly demonstrate the utility, at least in the present research context, of considering prosocial behavior as a multidimensional construct.

The present study utilized a conceptualization of Mainstream American values based on Mexican–Americans’ perceptions of dominant cultural values within the United States. Mainstream American values, nonetheless, are conceptually associated with values identified as characteristic of individualistic cultures. Likewise, some scholars have considered familism as a component of collectivism values (e.g., Hui, 1988; Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbusch, 1997). Thus, the present findings may have implications for understanding the role of individualism and collectivism in prosocial behaviors. Some studies have examined individualism and collectivism in relation to cooperative and competitive behaviors and have generally shown that individualistic values are linked to greater competitive behaviors whereas collectivistic values are linked to greater cooperative behaviors (e.g., Carlo, Roesch, Knight, & Koller, 2001). As suggested by the present study, however, individualism and collectivism may facilitate specific types of prosocial behaviors; thus, scholars are advised to consider these complex cultural constructs in relation to more nuanced types of prosocial behaviors. It is important to note that some scholars argue that familism and collectivism are distinct constructs or that familism may only characterize collectivism in some contexts (Oyserman et al., 2002). Regardless of this possibility, the present study suggests a need to further examine the role of cultural values in relation to specific types of prosocial behaviors.

The limitations of the present study include the non-casual nature of the study design, the limited set of culturally related values, and the self-report nature of the data (particularly the indicators of prosocial tendencies). Inferences regarding causal direction of effects must be tempered given our use of cross-sectional data. Longitudinal or experimental designs, and the use of behavioral or observational methodologies, will be necessary to accurately understand how ethnic group attachment, familism values, and Mainstream American values influence prosocial behaviors. Although the measures of familism and Mainstream American values showed excellent psychometric properties, they represent only one component of Mexican–American and Mainstream American value systems. Other values (e.g., respect, humility) also may prove to play an important role in promoting prosocial behaviors among Mexican–American adolescents. Despite these limitations, the present study provides initial evidence that ethnic group attachment may promote compliant, emotional, dire, and anonymous prosocial behaviors among Mexican–American early adolescents via the acceptance of the core Mexican–American values of familism. Moreover, the fact that both Mainstream American and Mexican value systems were associated with specific forms of prosocial behaviors provides additional evidence for the importance of distinguishing between different types of prosocial behaviors. We hope that this study will stimulate additional research focused specifically on ethnic and cultural mechanisms associated with prosocial behaviors, which, to date, has received little attention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for the project was provided by grants from the National Science Foundation to Gustavo Carlo (BNS 0132302) and George Knight (BNS-0132409). The authors would like to thank Arturo Calderón, Carlos Calderón, Pilar Calderón, Ana Coelho, Mariam El-Ashmawy, Jill Greene, Melinda Gonzales-Backen, Maria de Guzman, Rachel Hayes,
Kelly Hecklinger, Dayna Kleck, Claudia Lara, Erik Montanaro, Cassandra Peterson, Ana Ramirez, Maria Ramirez, Yuh-Ling Shen, and Charise Spisak for their valuable contributions. We appreciate the cooperation and support from the staff, teachers, parents, and students from participating schools in Phoenix and Gilbert school districts, and the Boys and Girls Club and the Stardust House staff in Arizona.

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