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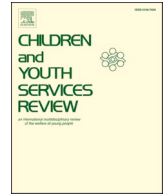
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# “It doesn’t matter how good the school is if you don’t learn to socialize”: Latinx immigrant students’ *testimonios* of coping with social isolation in high school

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding how Latinx immigrant youth cope with the stressor of social isolation is vital to understanding and improving their functioning and well-being; yet little is known about how they cope with experiences of social isolation in school. To fill this gap in the literature, the purpose of this exploratory study was to qualitatively examine the coping strategies that Latinx immigrant students utilized in the face of social isolation in one high school in a newer Latinx destination in the U.S. south. This study employed a narrative and culturally-congruent methodological approach, analyzing the digital *testimonios* of 5 female and 2 male Latinx young people, age 17–22. Latinx immigrant youth’s coping styles are theoretically interpreted using Endler’s (1997) multidimensional interaction model of stress, anxiety, and coping processes, which delineates three coping styles: task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented. Findings demonstrate that participants used a range of both emotion-oriented (including self-kindness, problem reframing, expressing emotion, self-blame, and seeking emotional support) and task-oriented (information-seeking and direct-action) strategies to cope with social isolation. Emotion-oriented strategies were featured more prominently than task-oriented coping in Latinx immigrant students’ narratives of coping with social isolation, and avoidance-oriented coping styles were not described. These findings highlight the importance of emotion-oriented coping for Latinx immigrant youth and illustrate the need for interventions that enhance coping skills and policies to prevent and ameliorate social isolation and thereby improve the socio-emotional well-being of Latinx immigrant students.

## 1. Introduction

Understanding how Latinx immigrant youth cope with the stressor of social isolation is vital to understanding and improving their functioning and well-being. Research examining coping strategies provides empirical insight into the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses that individuals employ to manage stress, which can inform interventions and services designed to facilitate or strengthen their ability to cope with a myriad of stressors. Scholarly attention to coping reflects an assets-based approach to the study of stress processes, shifting focus away from the adverse effects of stressful conditions and hardships in life to the skills and abilities that people leverage to protect themselves from harm (Azmitia, 2021). Because people who experience the same stressor often experience different outcomes as a result, examinations of how a particular group copes with the same stressor are needed to increase understanding of how differing coping strategies impact the effects of

stress (Pearlin, 1991).

Latinx immigrant youth, who leave family members, and in many cases, peer networks behind in their home countries, may be particularly vulnerable to the stressor of social isolation, which has been linked to a variety of adverse health and mental health outcomes and behaviors (Beller & Wagner, 2018; Calati et al., 2019; Endo et al., 2017; Ge et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2018; Niño et al., 2016). Upon entering school in the United States, Latinx immigrant students must learn a new language and adapt to a new culture, resulting in increased risk for loneliness (Benner, 2011; Benner & Wang, 2017; Cherg, 2015; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017; Potochnick et al., 2012; Safipour et al., 2011) and decreased likelihood of having close friends in school (Benner, 2011; Vaquera, 2009). Social isolation also contributes to poor academic achievement, which can negatively impact educational and career-related experiences in young adulthood and beyond (Brown & Braun, 2013; Johnson et al., 2011).

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Despite recognition of the adverse consequences of social isolation and Latinx immigrant youth's vulnerability to this stressor, there is a dearth of research examining the coping processes that Latinx immigrant youth enact to manage the stress of social isolation – a gap this research aims to address. Understanding how Latinx immigrant youth cope with experiences of social isolation can inform interventions and programs that might prevent or ameliorate the negative effects of this stressor on Latinx immigrant youth. Such efforts are even more pressing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased social isolation for school-aged youth (Loades et al., 2020) and was found to have differential mental health effects on Latinx youth (D'Costa et al., 2021). To contribute to the limited knowledge in this area, the purpose of this research was to explore the coping strategies that Latinx immigrant high school students employed in response to the stressor of social isolation.

### 1.1. Theoretical considerations

The study of coping is situated within a broader body of scholarship that examines adaptational processes in response to stress (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). Research in this area has evolved from the study of unconscious defense mechanisms to examinations of the “conscious and observable adaptational efforts” that individuals use to mitigate stress, which came to be known as coping (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000, p. 621). Interest in coping research grew as scholars recognized that discovering what coping processes work best for whom under what conditions has useful practical implications – providing an evidence base for clinical interventions to optimize people's ability to cope with particular problems (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000).

This study is guided by Endler's (1997) multidimensional interaction model of stress, anxiety, and coping processes, which has garnered substantial empirical support demonstrating its validity and reliability. This model posits that individuals experience stress when the personal and situational demands placed on them exceed their available resources, prompting the need for stress alleviation methods to be employed to avoid adverse outcomes (Endler, 1997). The physical, psychosocial, and situational experiences that provoke stress are referred to as stressors (Endler, 1997). Social isolation, the stressor this study examines, is considered a psychosocial stressor, which neurobiological research shows “results in alterations in reactivity to stress, social behavior, function of neurochemical and neuroendocrine system, physiological, anatomical and behavioral changes in both animal and humans” (Mumtaz et al., 2018, p. 1205). Most theorists agree that when a situation elicits stress, coping strategies are implemented to alleviate it through two principal tasks: making efforts to resolve the problem causing the stress, and managing emotions evoked by the stress (Kariv & Heiman, 2005).

Endler's (1997) model describes one's typical pattern of coping strategies as a coping style. The model delineates three coping styles, outlined by Higgins and Endler (1995): task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented. Endler (2001) defines each: “Task-oriented coping consists of efforts aimed at solving the problem. Emotion-oriented coping involves emotional reactions; and avoidance-oriented coping involves activities and cognitions aimed at avoiding the stressful situation and can be of a distraction or social diversion nature” (p. 2771). According to this model, the efficacy of a particular coping style is dependent on the type of stressor experienced (Endler, 1997). In particular, coping efficacy is related to the perceived level of controllability of the stressor, with task-oriented coping more efficacious in controllable situations and emotion-oriented coping more efficacious in uncontrollable situations (Endler, 1997). Avoidance-oriented coping is considered an initially appropriate but ultimately inefficacious response leading to poor adjustment (Endler, 1997). While personal factors may contribute to a preferred coping style, many individuals utilize a combination of coping responses that may cut across coping styles (Endler, 1997; Söllner et al., 1999).

### 1.2. Coping among Latinx immigrants

Research has shown that coping strategies may be influenced by ethnic and cultural characteristics (Lam & Zane, 2004; Yeh, et al., 2006) and ethnic minority status (Gonzales & Kim, 1997; Phinney & Haas, 2003), making it important to investigate coping processes amongst Latinx immigrants as a specific ethno-cultural group. Although Latinx immigrants are a heterogeneous group reflecting considerable diversity in national origins, socio-political contexts, and migratory relationships with the U.S., they share many cultural values as well as a political status as a minority ethno-cultural group and as immigrants to a new national context in which they must contend with unique stressors associated with acculturation and nativism (Garcini et al., 2021). Thus, Latinx immigrants, who leave their communities and cultural contexts of origin behind to come to the U.S., warrant separate examination from their U.S. counterparts.

Much of the research concerned with coping amongst Latinx immigrants has focused on responses to experiences of immigration-related stress, such as stress associated with deportation, interactions with immigration enforcement, anti-immigrant rhetoric, discrimination and other stressors to which immigrants are uniquely subject (Garcini et al., 2021; Lovato et al., 2018; Valentín-Cortés et al., 2020). To manage these stressors, research with undocumented Latinx adults and service providers supporting this population in Michigan found that religious coping and social support were frequently utilized; however, these coping strategies were sometimes impeded by the need for concealment within undocumented immigrant communities (Valentín-Cortés et al., 2020). A similar study with undocumented Latinx adults and service providers identified six coping strategies in response to immigration-related stress: cognitive reframing, behavioral adaptability, acceptance, sociability, courage, and ancestral/cultural pride (Garcini et al., 2021). These coping responses were found to help this population find meaning, purpose, and hope for the future (Garcini, et al., 2021). These studies demonstrate a wide variety of coping strategies utilized within the Latinx immigrant population in response to the aforementioned stressors, but do not specifically examine social isolation, a stressor that is important to examine among young people for whom forming relationships is a key developmental task.

Another stream of research explores how Latinx immigrants (and other immigrant groups) have coped with stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which include but are not limited to social isolation. Meaning-making coping techniques employed by Karen, Somali, and Latinx immigrant/refugee respondents in Minneapolis included a positive view of the self and optimism which helped in changing the situational meaning of the pandemic, and problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal, which helped in changing the global meaning of the pandemic (Ekwonye, Hearst, & Howard, 2021). Another study on this topic in South Texas identified behavioral, cognitive, social, and religious coping strategies that helped mitigate distress (Garcini et al., 2022). As evidenced in the studies reviewed here, cultural values evident in Latinx communities, including collectivism, familism, cultural pride, and religion/spirituality may influence coping preferences, as Latinx immigrants may navigate toward social support, culturally-specific resources, and meaning making processes more frequently than other groups (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

#### 1.2.1. Coping among Latinx immigrant youth

Research focusing specifically on Latinx immigrant youth's coping is limited; however, a few studies focused on adolescents offer an empirical basis on which to build. Using a mixed-methods approach, Gonzalez and colleagues (2020) found quantitative evidence suggesting that Latinx immigrant youth's coping strategies and the ways in which they are applied may depart from existing theoretical models of coping (Gonzalez et al., 2020) such as the Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced (COPE) inventory they tested, which was not a good fit for the sample. Instead, exploratory factor analysis confirmed three coping

factors that fit this group: purposeful cognitive/behavioral engagement, support seeking, and separation/disengagement (Gonzalez et al., 2020). This research attests to the need for the more nuanced insights into coping processes that qualitative examinations can provide, as revealed in the qualitative component of the same study which shed light on alternative approaches to coping that Latinx immigrant youth described, including relational coping, positive thinking/self-talk, planning, separating/disengaging, and behavioral coping (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

Two additional studies qualitatively explored coping among Latinx immigrant youth, involving the youth and their families in the research. Kam et al. (2018) explored how Mexican immigrant youth coped with the stress of being undocumented, finding that individual coping strategies included diversion, reframing, and normalizing. In addition to these strategies employed by the youth themselves, the researchers found that coping strategies were employed at the family level to help buffer youth from stressors associated with their undocumented status (Kam et al., 2018). Similarly, Brietzke and Perreira (2017) interviewed parent-adolescent dyads to identify four stress-coping trajectories among Latinx immigrant youth: protected, which identified “seeking support” as the coping style; Americanized, with “fitting in” as the coping style; resilient, with a coping style centered on “making meaning”; and consumed, with a coping style of “escaping.” The researchers assessed these coping styles in relation to expected socioeconomic mobility based on the trajectories of research participants, concluding that “those who coped by seeking support, fitting in, and finding purpose were better positioned to pursue upward socioeconomic mobility than those who coped by attempting to escape stressful circumstances” (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017). Consistent with Endler’s (1997) model, these findings suggest that avoidance-oriented coping is an inefficacious stress response. However, the authors focused on Latinx youth’s general coping strategies, rather than responses to a specific stressor, leaving significant knowledge gaps regarding the optimal ways of coping with social isolation.

This body of literature provides needed insight into an understudied process among Latinx immigrant youth, but in order to discover what works best for this population under what circumstances, research that examines Latinx immigrant youth’s responses to similarly stressful conditions is needed. Instead, existing studies offer in-depth examinations of how Latinx immigrant youth coped with universal stress and an array of immigration-related stressors (including fear of deportation, discrimination, family obligations and trauma), but are limited in their ability to identify what works best in response to the specific stressor of social isolation (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2013; Kam et al., 2018). To advance understanding of how different coping styles relate to differential outcomes, it is important to examine the responses Latinx immigrant youth apply in response to the same stressor using qualitative methods that center youth’s perspectives. Thus, there remains a pressing need to identify how Latinx immigrant youth, an already marginalized group that is at significant risk for loneliness and disconnection (Benner, 2011; Cherng, 2015; Potochnick et al., 2012; Stacciarini et al., 2015), effectively cope with the stressor of social isolation and its adverse effects.

### 1.3. The current study

This research explores the firsthand accounts of Latinx immigrant youth, all of whom were undocumented students residing in a newer Latinx destination in the U.S. South. A “newer Latinx destination” is a city or region that has experienced rapid growth in Latinx residents over the last 30 years, most of which are located in the U.S. south (Drever, 2008; Rodriguez, 2020; Vásquez, 2009). Social isolation may be more acutely experienced by Latinx immigrant students in newer Latinx destinations due to increased residential segregation (Lichter et al., 2010) and social disorganization (Crowley & Lichter, 2009) and decreased accessibility of social networks (Barrington et al., 2018, Conley and Bohon, 2009) in these areas.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the coping strategies that Latinx immigrant students utilized in the face of social isolation in the high school context. This qualitative research aimed to answer the question: How do Latinx immigrant youth in a newer Latinx destination cope with experiences of social isolation in high school? Through a narrative and culturally-congruent methodological approach, this article aims to illuminate Latinx immigrant students’ own perspectives, centering their first-person accounts of how they responded to this particular stressor. Filling a gap in the literature, this research contributes to scholarly and clinical knowledge in order to inform culturally-congruent approaches to improve Latinx immigrant youth’s socio-emotional well-being by intervening to prevent or reduce experiences of social isolation and strengthen their coping skills and resources.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Research design

To provide insight into Latinx youth’s own perspectives on their experiences of coping with social isolation, I analyzed the digital *testimonios* of 7 Latinx immigrant youth who attended the same high school. *Testimonio* is a type of narrative inquiry, using detailed stories of one or more individuals to help understand a problem (Creswell et al., 2007, pp. 240–241). A digital *testimonio* utilizes digital tools to record and document the narrator’s story (Benmayor, 2012), making the digital recordings available for subsequent analysis and/or dissemination. For this study, seven *testimonio* narratives were analyzed, an appropriate and sufficient number for a narrative qualitative research design aiming for rich description (Creswell et al., 2007).

*Testimonio* is a form of oral history with roots in Latin America, defined by Huber (2009), a contemporary scholar with expertise in the approach, as: “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (p. 644). Using a collaborative approach to knowledge production, *testimonio* is defined by the following features: (1) the narrator is an ordinary person who is able to offer a subaltern perspective based on their social location and identity; (2) the narrator’s *testimonio* is connected to or meant to be representative of an oppressed group and that group’s struggle for social justice; and (3) the *testimonio* narrator speaks out in response to the group’s oppression, imbuing *testimonios* with a sense of political urgency and invoking a call to action (Huber, 2009). The *testimonio* process is akin to a minimally-intrusive life-history interview, allowing participants to maintain narrative control over the *testimonio*, choosing what will be revealed and what direction and shape the narrative will take.

This methodology was deemed appropriate for the study population because it is considered a culturally-congruent and action-oriented form of research aiming to advocate for Latin American people (Benmayor, 2012; Huber, 2009). *Testimonio*, which began in Latin America and has frequently been utilized with Latinx populations, resonates with oral storytelling traditions within Latinx cultures (Huber, 2009). Further, the qualitative data derived from this approach provides rich, detailed descriptions of the coping strategies employed by Latinx immigrant students who experienced social isolation in high school, in answer to the research question. Appropriate to this study’s aims, a *testimonio* approach allowed in-depth examination of how Latinx immigrant youth coped with social isolation, and elicited their perspectives on coping effectiveness as reflected in their narratives.

### 2.2. Data collection

Data collection took place during two workshops for Latinx youth focused on digital media production and storytelling. I developed the curriculum for these workshops in partnership with a local Latinx-serving organization. Prior to these workshops, I had been



volunteering with this organization for more than one year, supporting the development and implementation of a Latinx youth organizing initiative. Through my work with this initiative, I formed relationships with the young people involved in this study, who were interested in gaining media production skills to further their organizing efforts. Thus, we conceived the idea to offer the workshops as a training opportunity. The workshops gave participants hands-on experience in utilizing video- and audio-recording equipment, using personal stories to raise awareness about social issues, conducting interviews, and editing. During the workshops, participants recorded one another's *testimonios* on video. The first workshop took place in October of 2018 with 5 participants, and the second workshop took place in November of 2018 with another 5 participants.

In collaboration with organization staff and youth involved with the organizing initiative, I created a semi-structured interview guide for conducting trauma-informed *testimonio* interviews during the workshops. All ten young people who participated in the workshops participated in a *testimonio* interview. Using the semi-structured interview guide, I interviewed each participant during the workshops while the other participants operated video cameras and audio recorders to digitally record the *testimonios*. All participants were present during each *testimonio* interview, as it was a training experience for all involved. As described elsewhere, listening to one another's *testimonios* was valuable for participants (Miller Scarnato, 2020). The interviews focused on challenges participants experienced in high school and lasted an average of 36 min. Examples of interview questions include: "Tell me about a difficult situation you experienced during high school. How did you navigate through it? What lasting effects did it have on you? Who helped you with that situation? What was most useful in managing the situation?"

2.3. Ethical standards

The recordings made during the workshops, which were meant as a training/skills-building opportunity for workshop participants to learn to share personal stories and utilize video recording equipment, provided valuable insight into the coping strategies workshop participants used in the face of social isolation in school. Thus, after the workshops concluded, I consulted the Tulane University IRB about the possibility of transcribing and analyzing the digital recordings as secondary data. As a retrospective study using secondary data, the IRB deemed the research exempt. Although an exempt status does not require participant consent to be obtained, I sought verbal consent from each of the workshop participants for their recordings to be analyzed as study data. Of the 10 participants, 7 gave consent for their recordings to be used for research purposes. Thus, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. At the time of consent, all participants were 18 or over, so parental consent was not required.

2.4. Participants and setting

Participants in the workshops who recorded digital *testimonios* were foreign-born Latinx immigrant students aged 17–22 (at the time of recording). All were recent high school graduates or high school upperclassmen (juniors and seniors) from the same local high school. Having completed 2–4 years of high school gave these participants ample experiences from which to draw on in providing *testimonio* of the challenges they experienced in high school, and their strategies for coping with those challenges. Of the 7 workshop participants who agreed to have their *testimonios* analyzed for research purposes, 5 were female and 2 were male. All were from Honduras or Mexico.

To avoid generalizations about this small group of participants and help to humanize an often criminalized and stereotyped population, brief biographical vignettes of each of the 7 participants are provided in Table 1. I wrote the vignettes based on biographical information included in each participant's *testimonio*, in addition to my own

Table 1  
Participant Biographical Vignettes.

Name	Age	Country of Origin	Biographical Vignette
Lia	17	Mexico	Lia migrated to the United States at the age of 15 to live with her father, who was already residing in the metropolitan area that is the setting of this study. She is the youngest of two daughters in her family, and her mother and sister reside in Mexico. Lia has always excelled academically and was considered a leader among her peers in Mexico. Lia is finishing her junior year of high school. She plays soccer, and is involved in the student government association. Lia is extremely considerate of others, and dreams of making positive change in her native country by becoming a lawyer to advocate for those who do not have a voice.
Giselle	18	Honduras	Giselle migrated to the United States with her mother at the age of 16 in order to attend a higher education institution in the U.S. She has one younger brother, who lives with her father in Honduras. Giselle and her mother visit Honduras at least once a year, usually in the summer, and her father and brother also visit the United States frequently. Giselle is a high school senior. She is very driven in her school pursuits and plans to attend an Ivy-league school and become an architect. She describes herself as shy, but is very funny and talkative with her friends and family.
Javi	22	Honduras	Javi identifies as Afro-Latino. He migrated to the United States when he was 15. Javi graduated high school and is attending community college to become an engineer, while working full-time at a grocery store. His mother and other family members live in New York, but Javi has some extended family members and many friends in his current city of residence. Javi is very outgoing and friendly and is a talented photographer.
Sofia	17	Honduras	Sofia is a high school junior who migrated to the United States with her mother at the age of 5 to reunite with her grandmother. After arriving in the U.S., Sofia's mother remarried and had two more children, Sofia's younger siblings. Sofia is very proud of her heritage and is very involved in her school. Sofia has the confidence to speak her mind in most situations.
Tatyana	17	Honduras	Tatyana is a proud Afro-Latina. She migrated to the United States when she was 8 to live with her parents who had migrated earlier in search of work opportunities. Tatyana is the second of three children, and lives with both her parents, both her siblings, and one nephew. Tatyana holds a part-time job at a local department store while finishing high school. She is highly involved in school activities with her peers, and has a remarkable sense of humor, often making others laugh.
Manny	21	Mexico	Manny migrated to the United States with his mother at the age of 6. His father and older half-brother remain in Mexico. Manny and his mom first resided in one southern state for approximately 9 years, before relocating to the study setting to be close to an uncle who was residing in the area. Manny graduated high school and is attending a local university, pursuing a degree in engineering, while juggling several part-time jobs. Manny is active in several student and community-based organizations. He considers the United States home.
Teresa	20	Mexico	Teresa was born in Mexico, but lived in El Salvador with her family during her childhood, due to threats of gang violence against her

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Age	Country of Origin	Biographical Vignette
			father. She and her younger sister later migrated to the U.S. at the age of 16 to be with their mother, who had gone there for work. She now has two more younger siblings. Teresa is a natural leader amongst her peers, maintaining a positive attitude and offering support and encouragement to others. Teresa is a high school senior who dreams of going to college.

observations of and conversations with each participant during their involvement with the partner organization. Participants reviewed and approved these vignettes as a form of member-checking, and each chose a pseudonym to protect their identities.

The public high school attended by each of the participants is located in a midsize suburban city in the U.S. south, considered a newer Latinx destination (Vásquez, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), the school enrolls approximately 1400 students in grades 9–12, with a student/teacher ratio of 18.64:1. The student body is majority Hispanic (49%), and also includes a large number of White (23%) and Black (20%) students. Data regarding the number of foreign-born students enrolled at the school is not available, but study participants shared in their *testimonios* that newcomer, first-generation immigrant students like them were a significant minority within the sizable Hispanic population at the school. This anecdotal information is further supported by state-level data showing that the immigrant share of the total population is just 4.2% (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2021). 56% of students are low-income (free or reduced lunch eligible). Demographic information about faculty and staff was not available.

### 2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis began in the Spring of 2019. I transcribed all *testimonio* recordings in their original language using NVivo software, and preliminary analysis began during transcription. First, I employed a restorying approach to chronologically describe each of the participant's experiences of coping with social isolation (Creswell et al., 2007; Huber & Whelan, 1999). Then I analyzed themes arising from each reconstructed narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Huber & Whelan, 1999) using a hybrid theoretical and inductive approach, beginning with several *a priori* categories based on my knowledge of interview content and my grounding in theoretical frameworks related to coping. I then used open coding to allow additional themes to emerge from the data. After conducting theoretical and open coding on all transcripts, I employed a focused coding strategy to refine themes and sub-themes across narratives. During this stage, I used a theory-informed approach to substantively analyze each theme and sub-theme, writing analytic memos and identifying particularly illustrative quotations. Finally, I used concept mapping to examine relationships between themes and establish an organizational flow for the data and conducted member-checks with participants.

### 2.6. Evaluative criteria

This research followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendations for establishing trustworthiness, which are intended for naturalistic forms of inquiry such as narrative research. To enhance the credibility of findings, the techniques of prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and member checking were used. Thick description and an inquiry audit were used to strengthen the study's transferability and dependability. I kept a reflexivity journal to help minimize my own bias and interest and establish confirmability. However, *testimonio* is a collaborative process in which researcher characteristics may influence the data and knowledge produced; thus, it is important to note that I am a White,

U.S.-born, adult female working with Latinx immigrant youth. My background in immigrant organizing, previous work experience in Central America, fluency in Spanish, and involvement with a local Latinx-serving organization facilitated trust and rapport with participants.

## 3. Results

While interviewees were free to share any challenges they faced in high school in their *testimonios*, social isolation emerged as a common theme amongst them, cutting across ethnic, national, gender, class, and other identities. In their *testimonios*, these Latinx immigrant students described a number of factors that contributed to their experiences of social isolation, including: limited English proficiency which caused communication difficulties and required them to be segregated in English Language Learning (ELL) classrooms, starting school immediately after migrating, which was often in the middle of the school year, and feeling excluded by native-born Latinx students, whose bicultural identities were different from those of immigrant students. As will be further elaborated upon, Latinx students found ways of coping with, navigating, and in some cases, overcoming social isolation, bearing testament to their strengths and resilience. However, they still perceive the opportunity to socialize with their peers in the school environment as an important one, vital to their overall sense of well-being. As the titular quote from Lia (provided here with more context) demonstrates, schools should support Latinx students (and all students) in both their academic and their social formation:

A challenge I had in coming to the United States was having to leave my grandparents, my mom, but also my friends and my culture. But it's also brought many good things. Many things that require work, yes, things that are perhaps going to isolate you from some things also, but I believe that after that, I met people who taught me to have equilibrium in my life, that not everything is school, not everything is friends. There has to be a balance, because it doesn't matter how good the school is if you don't learn to socialize. You're never going to be able to share your knowledge with other people.

Taken together, the digital *testimonios* reveal that social isolation was a shared experience amongst study participants – a finding that is well-supported in extant literature on Latinx immigrant students (Benner, 2011; Cherng, 2015). Following Endler's (1997) model, findings demonstrate that participants used a range of both emotion-oriented (including self-kindness, problem reframing, expressing emotion, self-blame, and seeking emotional support) and task-oriented (information-seeking and direct-action) strategies to cope with social isolation. Emotion-oriented strategies were featured more prominently than task-oriented coping in Latinx immigrant students' narratives of coping with social isolation, and avoidance-oriented coping styles were not described.

### 3.1. Emotion-oriented coping

Participants frequently described the use of emotion-oriented coping strategies in their *testimonio* narratives. Emotion-oriented coping responses are self-oriented and meant to alter one's emotional response to a problem or situation so that it evokes less stress (Endler & Parker, 1999). The narratives of those who employed emotion-oriented coping styles were stories of venting, processing, and managing the feelings that experiences of social isolation brought forth, which helped participants to regulate their emotions and maintain their well-being in stressful situations. Participants described the emotion-oriented coping strategies of self-kindness, reframing the problem, expressing emotion, self-blame, and seeking emotional support.

In Javi's narrative, he described how he showed kindness to himself to help him cope with being made fun of because of his limited English

proficiency:

I remember a lot of the times half of the classroom would be laughing at me, and I'd be like, "Okay. I didn't say it right and now I know how to say it." Understanding that, it's okay to be wrong was very much my mentality. I had to tell myself that because nobody else was saying it. You have to be the one, you have to be the change, even for yourself, and it's hard. I had to be able to tell myself, "Hey, it's fine. I was wrong, but it's okay."

By treating himself with kindness and understanding, Javi was able to regulate the negative emotions he felt, allowing him to remain calm in a stressful situation. Javi also described a problem reframing approach, altering his cognitions to gain a new perspective on the problem:

You just have to understand that this is just a phase, and maybe nobody's on your side right now... And I remember that like, forgiveness, that has been a very, very big thing that I've had to learn through that even, just because, I mean it's hard and it sucks, but people sometimes just don't know how to act.

In his reframing of the problem, Javi views his experience of social isolation as a result of his peers' ignorance of prosocial norms. He also displayed a positive expectation regarding his ability to eventually solve the problem, understanding that this stressful period was "just a phase." By viewing the problem in this way, Javi was able to alter his feelings about it so that it was experienced as less stressful.

Giselle also engaged in problem reframing to help her manage negative feelings about her lack of social connections:

I know that tough things are going to happen, but there's people that are going through worse stuff. And so, I just think about like, wait, but my story isn't that bad. There's people who have lost a lot more. And so, I look at it in a positive way. I'm really optimistic and I just think about my future. Because I don't want to be that person who stays in the same place for the rest of their lives... I think everything is mental. If you think in a positive way, like, if you start with, "Okay, I'm not going to focus on what I left behind, I'm going to focus on what I want for the future."

Giselle's favorable comparison of herself to others demonstrates a conscious shift in perspective, allowing her to alleviate feelings of distress by choosing optimism. By thinking about her experience in relative terms, she reframes the problem to focus on what she has gained rather than what she has lost. Both Javi and Giselle demonstrate an intentional effort to cognitively reframe their experience of social isolation, minimizing associated stress by making efforts to transform their understanding of the stressful situation.

Teresa explained how she drew upon emotion-oriented coping, specifically expressing emotion, to manage her feelings of loneliness:

I am still struggling. I feel sad and lonely most of the time... When I felt alone, when I needed something, when I felt sad or upset, I always went to my room and I put on the music loud, and I prayed, and I put a pillow over my face and I screamed so hard that I can't even feel that hurt.

For Teresa, venting her negative feelings about the social isolation she experienced allowed her a sense of relief from the pain they caused. However, Teresa described her struggle with the loneliness as an ongoing problem, suggesting that expressing her emotions may have only provided temporary relief from the stress of social isolation.

Lia also described an emotion-oriented coping style that tended toward self-blame in relation to the problem of not forming peer relationships on her school soccer team. In her *testimonio*, she focused on her own role in contributing to the problem:

When I joined the soccer team, unfortunately, I had the same mentality of being shy, and I couldn't really integrate rapidly with the

group of my teammates because they were already on the team before I joined, so they already knew each other. And in a way, I separated myself from them, like I was alone, and they were on one side, and I went to the other. I didn't really make an effort to have a lot of contact with them because I didn't know how to go about it... And so, it was another hard time, something [playing soccer] that supposedly was going to help me to forget a lot of things also started to cause new problems, but not because they created them but because I did. My lack of, in a way, confidence in myself, it created problems.

Lia's narrative shows how she assigned herself the blame for feeling socially isolated within her high school soccer team. By examining how her own actions may have contributed to the problems she experienced, Lia was better able to manage her feelings about the problem. Lia also sought support from her father to help her process her feelings about the problem, as she went on to explain:

I started to gain confidence in myself because of my Dad. He helped me a lot... When I came home from school, and I told him "This, and this happened," he took the time, even though he had a lot of work, many things to do, he took the time when I got home to say, "Ok, we're going to talk." And he told me many things that I didn't understand because I was also a very closed-minded person, and I couldn't see things the way I see them now. However, I started to listen, I started to try to put little things that he told me in practice, and with that I could, I mean, it's not that now I'm the most self-confident person, however, I do have a lot more self-confidence than I did in the beginning.

Lia navigated toward the primary source of social support available to her – her father – to express and better manage her emotional responses to feeling isolated. Through the emotion-oriented approaches of self-blame and seeking emotional support, Lia was able to increase her self-awareness and learn from her perceived mistakes. Once she had managed her feelings about the issue, she was able to implement a task-oriented approach to resolving the problem by putting what she learned into practice.

### 3.2. Task-oriented coping

In their narratives, study participants also described the use of task-oriented approaches to coping with feelings of isolation. The narratives of those who employed a task-oriented coping style were tales of triumphing over social isolation, suggesting that these students felt they were able to take steps to resolve the problem itself. Task-oriented coping includes efforts to solve or alter the problem situation with an emphasis on planning and direct action (Endler & Parker, 1999) and are considered the most efficacious in response to controllable situations (Endler, 1997). In their *testimonios*, participants described information-seeking and direct action as task-oriented strategies they applied to cope with experiences of social isolation.

One of the tasks participants engaged in to solve the problem of social isolation was seeking information that would help them to do so. Tatyana, who is Afro-Latina, reported feeling excluded by both the Latinx students and the African-American students in her school. However, "finding out more about my people, trying to learn more about my heritage, and then just having patience for people to understand" helped her cope with her unique experience. Javi also sought information that would help him feel more integrated, and put it into practice, explaining:

Once you set your mind to something, you have to understand that you have to gain whatever it takes to get to your destination. So, you want to watch people who already are where you want to be, and see what they are, whatever they're doing that you want to implement in your life. So, I started reading. I read a lot of novels... I would see



how people in the books would react to things and I would try to put that into my life. Like always, people-watching to an extent.

Javi formulated a plan to achieve his goal of creating connections at school and took consistent action to carry it out. By reading and observing others, Javi learned new ways of behaving that he was able to implement in order to better integrate with the school community. As these participants described, gaining information and knowledge was a task-oriented approach that helped them move toward problem resolution.

Manny also employed a task-oriented style to cope with his high school experience of social isolation through an approach rooted in direct action – he took active steps to connect with his peers by joining a team:

I tried to cope with what I had when I got here. But in my high school, there were not many things to do. But the only thing I could really do was the soccer team - that's what mainly my friends consisted of. When it comes to sports, there's no boundaries on, you know, what country, where you're from, whatever. You're playing with whoever, you're going to build that relationship, you know? And that's something that helped me. Because my sophomore year, I joined the soccer team, and that's where I met most of my friends. That's how I was able to overcome that challenge.

Manny's active approach of joining the soccer team effectively fulfilled his need to form peer relationships in high school. By taking action to make friends, Manny was able to resolve his experience of social isolation.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to knowledge about Latinx immigrant youth's responses to stress associated with experiences of social isolation in school, extending beyond studies that focus on general coping strategies or universal approaches to coping with a variety of stressors. This approach advances understanding of what coping strategies work best for a particular group of people experiencing similarly stressful conditions, which may be more clinically relevant than coping research with a broader focus (Sommerfield & McCrae, 2000). By illuminating Latinx immigrant youth's responses to the stressor of social isolation, the findings of this study can help achieve targeted clinical goals focused on helping members of this group manage problems related to their specific conditions by building on the strengths and skills they already possess (Sommerfield & McCrae, 2000).

This study's findings reveal that this group of Latinx immigrant students coped with the stressor of social isolation in high school through both emotion-oriented and task-oriented coping styles. Emotion-oriented coping featured more prominently in students' narratives than task-oriented coping, and avoidance-oriented coping strategies were absent from their narratives. According to Endler (1997), both person variables and situational factors impact one's coping response. However, situational factors can "override" personal preferences when a particular coping style seems more suitable to situational demands (Endler, 1997). The frequent use of emotion-oriented coping styles evidenced in this study suggests that participants may have perceived social isolation as an uncontrollable situation for which emotion-oriented coping is considered more efficacious (Endler, 1997). These findings help to highlight the important role of emotion-oriented coping for Latinx immigrant youth. Participants gave rich, narrative descriptions of their use of emotion-oriented coping styles, demonstrating a range of strategies employed to maintain well-being in times of stress. Self-kindness, problem reframing, expressing emotion, self-blame, and seeking emotional support were strategies participants employed to manage the difficult, negative feelings associated with social isolation.

Participants' descriptions of the emotion-oriented coping strategies

of self-kindness and problem reframing in response to social isolation contributes to a growing body of scholarship focused on the importance of attending to coping processes that lead to positive affective outcomes (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Although Endler's (1997) model suggests that task-oriented coping styles are more effective responses to resolving stressful situations than emotion-oriented coping that sometimes increases stress (p. 143), the findings of this study lend further support to extant literature demonstrating that emotion-oriented coping is effective among Latinx youth (Gloria et al., 2009). By predominantly engaging in emotion-oriented coping strategies, participants demonstrated a need to prioritize their well-being in the face of stress (Gloria et al., 2009). Given the complex array of stressors that Latinx immigrant youth must cope with in a new country context (Barrett et al., 2013; DeJonckheere et al., 2017), the importance of attending to their emotions must not be ignored. Research with other groups theorizes that "coping processes that generate and sustain positive affect in the context of chronic stress" may co-occur with and offset distress, meriting greater attention in coping research (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000, p. 648). Consistent with such ideas, the strategies of self-kindness and reframing described in this study may reflect participants' efforts to manage stress through a positive affect, supporting broader models of stress and coping that might help us understand how coping promotes well-being (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000).

Although emotion-oriented coping strategies were predominant in students' narratives, participants also described the use of task-oriented coping strategies including information-seeking strategies that empowered them with new information to approach the problem and direct-action approaches that demonstrated a targeted effort to resolve the problem. Such task-oriented approaches are considered more efficacious at managing stress in the long-run (Endler, 1997), and are frequently employed by Latino males (Gloria et al., 2009). Participants who engaged in task-oriented coping strategies may have perceived their experiences of social isolation as a controllable situation, for which task-oriented coping is thought to be more suitable (Endler, 1997). Participants who demonstrated task-oriented coping strategies implemented active steps to resolve the social isolation they were experiencing by focusing on their interactions with others.

Consistent with other research with Latinx immigrant youth (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017; Edwards & Romero, 2008), participants in this study did not describe the use of avoidance-oriented coping styles, which are included in Endler's (1997) model. Both emotion-oriented and task-oriented coping styles are considered proactive approaches to managing stress (Kariv & Heiman, 2005), characterized by efforts to alter the situation and one's response to it. In contrast, avoidance-oriented coping strategies are characterized by the absence of actions to address the situation and the stress it invokes (Kariv & Heiman, 2005). The absence of avoidance-oriented coping styles among this group may suggest that Latinx immigrant youth, a group that is notable for their agency and resilience (DeJonckheere et al., 2017; Zetino et al., 2020), tend to prefer proactive approaches to resolving problems.

#### 5. Limitations

These findings should be considered in relation to several limitations of this study. First, findings from this small sample size are context-specific and therefore, are not intended to be generalized to a broader population. The location of this study – a newer Latinx destination in the U.S. south – undoubtedly influenced participants' experiences. Thus, the transferability of findings may be limited to similar areas with low immigrant density.

While this study highlighted Latinx immigrant youth's perspectives, they may reflect self-report or social desirability bias. Given that the Latinx students who provided digital *testimonios* are involved with a local organization focused on Latinx youth empowerment, a potential sampling bias must be acknowledged wherein the perspectives provided come from a group of youth who may have greater social support and/or



similar approaches to coping with stress as compared to the broader population of Latinx young people in the area. Furthermore, three participants did not consent for their *testimonio* recordings to be included in this analysis, and their narratives might offer differing perspectives distinct from those included in the convenience sample of this study. Despite these limitations, this study's findings contribute to understanding how a unique group of youth – Latinx immigrants in a newer Latinx destination – cope with the stress of social isolation.

## 6. Implications

This study's findings suggest important directions for future research needed to understand and enhance coping skills and decrease social isolation among Latinx immigrant youth. The frequent use of emotion-oriented coping strategies amongst this group warrants further examination that extends beyond the limitations of this study to examine patterns in coping styles amongst larger groups of Latinx immigrant youth in newer and established Latinx destinations and explore relationships between emotion-oriented coping and social outcomes using longitudinal, process-oriented methods. Future research with this population should also examine coping responses to additional types of stressors to better understand the interplay between situational factors and personal preferences (Endler, 1997). Because research has shown that coping styles may be gender-specific, this pattern should be explored in research with Latinx immigrant youth (Wu et al., 2018). Furthermore, coping style interacts with the multi-level resources (social and psychological) available to support an individual in the face of stress (Patterson & McCubbin, 1987), which were outside the purview of this narrative inquiry, but should be considered in future research. Continued research in this area may lead to a culturally-specific theoretical model of stress and coping within this population, which would be useful in identifying the most effective coping strategies in response to social isolation and additional unique stressors Latinx immigrant youth face.

The employment of both task-oriented and emotion-oriented approaches to coping with social isolation amongst this study's participants suggests that Latinx immigrant youth need opportunities and resources that will help them process and manage their emotions as well as formulate and implement plans to become more socially integrated. Given participants' focus on managing negative emotions, services and programs that offer Latinx immigrant students a space to discuss and process feelings are needed. Group modalities may be particularly effective in addressing social isolation and its negative effects (Cruwys et al., 2014), offering Latinx immigrant students the opportunity to discuss and process their emotions while affording them the opportunity to develop friendships in a safe and supportive environment (Edwards et al., 2014; Villalba, Ivers, & Ohlms, 2010). Culturally-responsive interventions (Blanco-Vega, 2008; Lo et al., 2015; Silver, 2015) and school policies and structures that support integration (Birman et al., 2007; Ham et al., 2017) are also needed to help meet the complex socio-emotional needs of Latinx immigrant youth as they adjust to the U.S. school system.

Given the importance of opportunities for students to form peer relationships and practice prosocial behavior to overall health (Roach, 2018), the continued availability of programs, extracurricular activities, and opportunities to socialize in the school environment are paramount. Helping professionals, especially those in school settings, can play an active role in supporting these efforts by providing counseling or psychotherapy services, referring youth to extracurricular activities that can facilitate peer bonding and connection to the school community, and advocating for their full integration in the school environment through equitable and culturally-appropriate practices, policies, and programs. Such actions will help ensure that schools do in fact help students learn to socialize, as the titular quote from Lia advocates.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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