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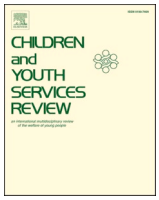

Barriers and bridges to well-being for Latinx immigrant youth in a new Latinx destination: A digital narrative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of Latinx young people in the United States are facing unique challenges to attaining and maintaining well-being as residents of new Latinx destinations. This study analyzes the *testimonios* of 12 Latinx immigrant youth (aged 18–21) who participated in a digital narrative research project in New Orleans – a new Latinx destination in the US South. Findings are interpreted and discussed through the lens of the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), revealing Latinx young people's perspectives on the barriers to experiencing well-being, the "bridges" that helped them to experience well-being despite those barriers, and the ways in which broader contexts and identities shaped their lived experiences. This study offers evidence of the detrimental health impacts of racialization and marginalization on Latinx youth in a new Latinx destination, as well as the assets, resources, coping skills, and meaning-making processes that supported their well-being.

1. Introduction

An increasing number of Latinx young people in the United States are facing unique challenges to attaining and maintaining well-being as residents of new Latinx destinations – areas that have experienced rapid growth of the Latinx population in the last thirty years. Due to labor market changes and an increasing amount of Latinx migrants seeking safety in the U.S. (Bermeo, 2018; Orozco, 2018), cities and regions that did not have large, established Latinx populations – many of them in the South – experienced rapid growth in Latinx residents (Drever, 2008; Price, 2012; Ribas, 2015; Vásquez, 2009). New Orleans, the setting for this research, is one such area that experienced rapid growth of the mostly Latinx immigrant population following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Chaney, 2017; Drever, 2008; Sluyter et al., 2015).

Existing research has demonstrated that Latinx immigrants in new Latinx destinations may be more vulnerable to health and social disparities than those in traditional immigrant gateways, underscoring the importance of considering their experiences separately. For example, studies have found that human services institutions in these areas often lack the resources, language skills, and experience needed to meet the unique needs of Latinx families, especially while contending with federal- and state-level policies that exclude many Latinx peoples from receiving certain services (Held et al., 2018; Lanesskog, 2018; Roth & Grace, 2018). In addition to these barriers, research utilizing national datasets found that in new Latinx destinations, Latinx peoples are at increased risk for lethal violence (Barranco et al., 2017; Shihadeh & Winters, 2010), social disorganization (Crowley & Lichter, 2009), residential segregation (Lichter et al., 2010), lack of health insurance coverage (Monnat, 2017), discrimination (Clark, 2020; Flippen & Parado, 2015) and environmental health hazards (Alvarez & Norton-Smith, 2018). This literature illuminates some of the disadvantages and increased risks for Latinx peoples in new Latinx destinations that may negatively impact their well-being. However, the limited amount of research in these areas tends to focus on adults, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding the well-being and firsthand perspectives of Latinx immigrant youth in new Latinx destinations.

This study begins to address this gap by reporting findings from a digital narrative, anti-oppressive research project with Latinx immigrant youth in New Orleans that explored (a) Latinx young people's perspectives on the barriers to well-being they experienced; (b) the "bridges" that helped them to experience well-being despite those barriers; and (c) the ways in which broader contexts and identities shaped their lived experiences. The purpose of this study was to enhance understandings of the interlocking, multi-level systems that lead to social and health disparities for Latinx youth in New Orleans. This research actively involved Latinx youth as co-creators of knowledge in the research process to illuminate Latinx young people's own perspectives on their experiences of well-being in a new Latinx destination and

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promote their well-being through practice, policy, and research.

1.1. The well-being of Latinx immigrant youth in new Latinx destinations

While there has been significant research on the experiences of Latinx peoples in well-established immigrant destinations with large Latinx populations, far fewer studies have focused on Latinx peoples in new Latinx destinations (Corona et al., 2017) and even fewer studies have focused on the well-being of Latinx youth in these areas as potentially different from adults (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017; Corona et al., 2017; Dondero & Muller, 2012; Silver, 2015). Because experiences change throughout the life course and youth operate in different social contexts than adults, the well-being of Latinx youth in new Latinx destinations merits further examination.

The limited body of scholarship focused on Latinx youth in new Latinx destinations recognizes the influential role of the school context on their well-being, emphasizing the need for schools to be responsive to Latinx students' unique needs (Dondero & Muller, 2012; Michaels, 2014; Silver, 2015). One study used national public school and teacher data to compare the characteristics of public high schools in new and established Latinx destinations, finding that schools in new destinations have better resources, but "may be less equipped to keep up with the staffing demands and linguistic needs that have accompanied Latinx population growth in their communities" (Dondero & Muller, 2012, p. 497). An observational study of a middle school in a new Latinx destination concluded that Mexican-American students were marginalized within the school environment, primarily through their interactions with teachers which were characterized by "low teacher expectation, teacher skill deficit, selective teacher engagement, and negative teacher attitudes" (Michaels, 2014, p. 727). Due to a lack of support from teachers, Mexican-American middle school students were academically disadvantaged and disengaged, which raises concerns about their self-esteem and future school performance and persistence (Michaels, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2010). Using observational and interview methods to examine the integration of Latinx youth in a public high school in a new destination in the South, Silver (2015) found that Latinx students experienced segregation and discrimination at school; however, school clubs centered on Latinx identity and heritage helped buffer them from the negative effects of discrimination. These studies attest to the importance of considering the school context as an influential player in the well-being of Latinx youth in new Latinx destinations.

1.2. Immigrant exclusion in the South

The youth participants of this research were non-citizen,[1] Latinx immigrant youth in New Orleans during the Trump administration; thus, it is vital to contextualize participants' experiences of well-being within the sociopolitical context of the South. Research focused on new Latinx destinations in the South suggests that state and local policies in these regions often exclude immigrants from accessing services, benefits, resources, and educational opportunities, thereby prohibiting the integration and advancement of Latinx immigrant residents (Marrow, 2020; S. Rodriguez, 2018; S. Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). For example, only one southern state (Virginia) offers in-state tuition for undocumented youth, which means Latinx youth without legal status in the rest of the US south are often unable to attend college due to the exorbitant costs associated with being considered international students (Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; S. Rodriguez, 2018). College access is further complicated for newcomer youth, who have little time to learn the US educational system (Diaz-Strong, 2021). One study analyzed undocumented Latinx youth's perspectives on college access in South Carolina, finding that most students felt unable to trust high school personnel who might have assisted them in accessing higher education (Roth, 2017). Although not explored in the existing literature, the barriers that prohibit non-citizen Latinx youth from accessing higher education in the US south are likely to have implications for their well-being (Roth, 2017),

The southern context is also considered a hostile receiving context for Latinx immigrants, especially those who are non-citizens (S. Rodriguez, 2020; Roth, 2017). Thus, much of the research examining Latinx youth's experiences in new Latinx destinations in the US south is concerned with identity and belonging, which can have a significant influence on well-being (Gonzales et al., 2013; Nienhusser & Romandia, 2022; L. V. Rodriguez, 2023). One study examined ethnic identity development among Latinx youth in a Southeastern new destination community, finding that youth expressed pride in their bilingual abilities and cultural group, but reported communication difficulties and frequent experiences of discrimination in their schools and communities (Corona et al., 2017). Focusing specifically on well-being, another study investigated the stress-coping trajectories of Latinx youth as they transitioned from adolescence to adulthood in North Carolina (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017). This qualitative research found that although participants described stressors similar to those reported by youth in more established Latinx destinations (such as discrimination, negative stereotypes, and legal status issues), the resources available to support them were limited (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017). However, youth described buffers against stress at the individual, family, and school/community level and coping strategies that helped support their upward socioeconomic mobility (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017). This research highlights the importance of understanding both the barriers and bridges to well-being for Latinx youth as they emerge into adulthood, especially in the anti-immigrant context of new Latinx destinations in the US south.

Existing research has also recognized the importance of considering how Latinx peoples fit into Southern notions of racial hierarchy, especially in new Latinx destinations in the South that tend to be characterized by a Black/White racial binary (Brown et al., 2018; Marrow, 2009). Thus, Latinx immigrants arriving to these areas must negotiate processes of racialization and ethnic identity formation as they attempt to become integrated within the racial fabric of southern society (Brown et al., 2018; Marrow, 2009; S. Rodriguez, 2020). An ethnographic study examining these processes among undocumented Latinx youth in the southern context concluded that they are "racially positioned as different, excluded, and othered" and therefore, had to find ways to negotiate and resist racialization processes in their schools and communities by reclaiming their "Latinx immigrant undocumentedness" (S. Rodriguez, 2020, p. 517). This racialization process can have significant, harmful effects on Latinx youth, resulting in feelings of isolation, exclusion, and marginalization (S. Rodriguez, 2020) which are stressors detrimental to well-being (Garcini et al., 2022).

2. Theoretical framework

To understand the well-being of Latinx youth in a new Latinx destination, a theoretical framework that attends to the intersecting historical, social, cultural, and physical contexts that impact their lived experiences is needed. This study draws on socio-ecological perspectives of well-being that emphasize the relationship between individuals and the interconnected systems with which they interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Specifically, this study employs the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) to analyze Latinx youth's *testimonios* of the challenges they experience related to well-being in one new Latinx destination (Spencer et al., 1997). This theoretical framework was deemed appropriate for this research as it helps illuminate the multilevel risks and vulnerabilities youth experience as well as the

[1] Non-citizens – a group that includes various immigrant statuses (including undocumented persons, Legal Permanent Residents, visa-holders, asylum-seekers, those with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients) – constitute a significant percentage of Latinx peoples in new Latinx destinations, including New Orleans (Drever, 2005).

resilience strategies they employ and has frequently been used to examine of the lived experiences and healthy development of youth of color (Dupree et al., 2015; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Spencer et al., 2015; Velez & Spencer, 2018).

Employing a risk-vulnerability perspective, PVEST theorizes a five-stage model of identity formation: (1) one's history of prior experiences and coping outcomes constitutes her/his *net vulnerability level*; (2) an actual experience that challenges one's well-being constitutes her/his *net stress engagement*; (3) the individual employs *reactive coping methods* to resolve situations that produce dissonance; (4) as coping strategies are repeated and become stable over time, they combine with self-appraisals to form *emergent identities*; (5) one's identity impacts her/his future behaviors and outcomes, resulting in *life-stage, specific coping outcomes* (Spencer et al., 1997, 2019). An innovative theory of youth risk, resilience, and development, PVEST uses intersectionality as a critical analytic tool to engage "the complexity and variation of identities experienced by individuals" (Spencer et al., 2019, p. 105), and accounts for "the vulnerability of people of color who are burdened by unique and often underexamined levels of risk while acknowledging potential sources of support" (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 492). Offering a "context-connected, culture recognizing, systems model and identity formation perspective" (Spencer et al., 2019, p. 105), PVEST's five-stage model is well-suited to understanding the experiences of Latinx youth in a new Latinx destination.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Researcher positionality

As researcher characteristics influence the research, it is important to note that I am a White, non-Latinx woman in her 30′s who conducted this research with a diverse group of Latinx youth, ages 18–21. I am fluent in Spanish, which proved crucial to building rapport with and gaining the confidence of research participants (Cacari-Stone & Avila, 2012). However, my outsider status (non-Latinx) and other identity characteristics (skin color, gender, age, nationality, profession) undoubtedly contributed to power imbalances throughout the research process. Through an anti-oppressive and participatory research approach (Strier, 2007; Lilly, 2022), I consciously acknowledged and attended to power relations. I practiced reflexivity by recording reflexive memos throughout the research process. I partnered with a local organization, Puentes New Orleans (Puentes) to conduct this research using a community-engaged approach.

The present study was developed in collaboration with Puentes staff and youth organizers.

3.2. Methodologies

This manuscript reports the findings from the *AltaVoces* Project, which employed an anti-oppressive social work research (AOSWR) methodology to engage Latinx youth in collaborative processes of inquiry, healing, and social change. AOSWR is grounded in emancipatory research traditions that aim to co-create knowledge with marginalized groups to abolish oppression (Strier, 2007). In alignment with this methodological orientation, the *AltaVoces* Project utilized participatory, digital narrative methods – combining *testimonio,* narrative therapy, and participatory media (more thoroughly described in Lilly, 2022).

Testimonio is a form of oral history with roots in Latin America that is connected to an oppressed, marginalized, or persecuted group and invokes a call to action (Huber, 2009). Techniques (like externalizing the problem and double-listening[2]) from narrative therapy, a de-pathologizing approach to working with people to make meaning of trauma and hardship through storytelling (White & Epston, 1990), were incorporated into *testimonio* interviews to protect participants from re-traumatization and highlight participants' strengths. Participatory digital methods engage participants in the research process by using digital tools to generate and analyze data. The integration of these three methods actively involved research participants in a trauma-informed, action-oriented approach to understanding, analyzing, and eradicating the forms of oppression that negatively influence their ability to attain and maintain well-being.

3.3. Research participants and process

After obtaining university IRB approval, and creating a Memorandum of Understanding with Puentes, I used a network approach to recruit a purposive sample of 12 first-generation, Latinx immigrant young people, ages 18–21, in the Greater New Orleans area. Youth gave informed consent to participate in the study. The purposive sample selected reflects the diverse nationalities of Latinx peoples in the New Orleans area, as shown in Table 1. All participants shared a political status as first-generation immigrants with varying immigrant statuses that are denied the full rights of U.S. citizenship.

The research process was participatory, flexible, and iterative, engaging participants in data collection and analysis. I conducted individual *testimonio* interviews with each participant, using a minimally-intrusive interview style that centered participants' voices and afforded them control over their *testimonio* narratives. Interviews used a narrative therapy framework for "receiving and documenting testimonies of trauma" consisting of a three-part interview format: setting a context for the *testimonio,* documenting the trauma/oppression and its effects, and eliciting stories of survival/resistance (Denborough, 2005). All *testimonios* were digitally recorded (audio and video) and lasted between 0.75 and 2.5 h.

3.4. Analytic procedure

Data analysis began concurrently with data collection, proceeding in three stages: preliminary analysis, participatory analysis, and concluding analysis. Across all three stages, a critical narrative analytic approach was used, integrating Lieblich et al.'s (1998) holistic-content and categorical-content methods with Fraser's (Fraser, 2004) line-by-line approach. A global overview of the analytic process detailing the specific actions performed at each stage is provided in Fig. 1.

As shown in Fig. 1, participants were involved in the participatory analysis stage through two focus groups that served as sites for

Table 1
Participant Demographics.

Testimonio Name[a]	Age	Sex	Country of origin	Age at migration
I have me protecting me	19	Female	Guatemala	12
Since I came here, I'm a new person	21	Female	Mexico	17
I want to be that role model	20	Female	Honduras	5
I had to move forward	18	Female	Guatemala	12
I wanted to challenge myself	18	Male	Nicaragua	15
I don't have to be ashamed of being Latina	20	Female	Honduras	14
I'm always fighting for what I want	19	Female	Mexico	15
I wanted to make her proud	21	Male	Mexico	6
I'm good the way I am	19	Male	Honduras	14
You don't have to change	20	Male	Honduras	17
I try to see the bigger picture	18	Female	Mexico	15
We have to put our hearts in it	18	Female	El Salvador	11

[a] Testimonio names are participant-approved quotes from the testimonio and are used to protect participants' identities.

[2] For a detailed description of the narrative therapy techniques utilized and their incorporation into interviews, see Appendix A: Trauma-Informed Practices for Digitally-Recording Interviews in Author(s), 2022.

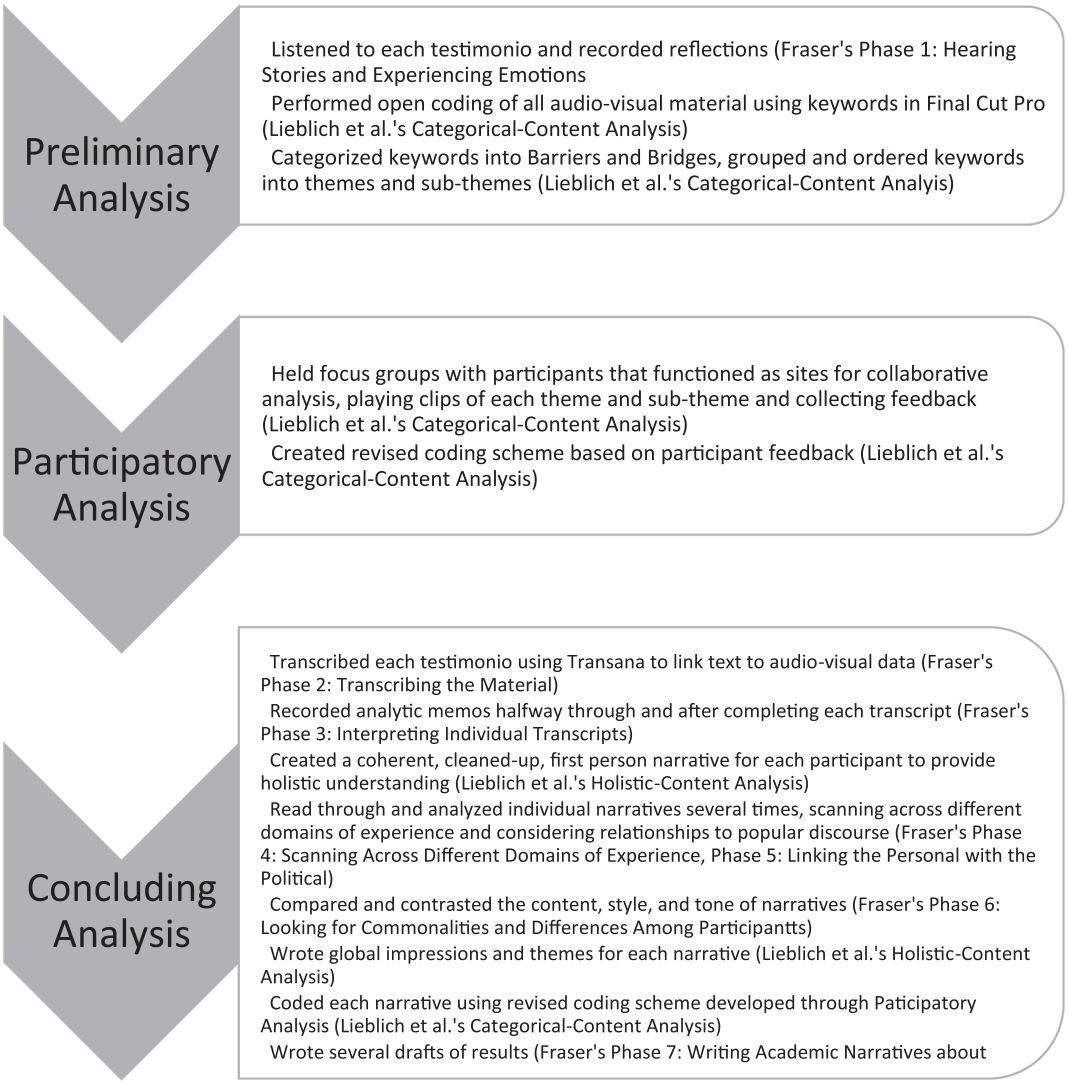

Fig. 1. Actions Performed During Each Stage of Analysis.

collaborative analysis. During focus groups, participants viewed and discussed the digital recordings to inductively interpret them. The first focus group included nine participants and lasted 2.5 h; the second focus group included the remaining three participants and lasted 2 h. In both focus groups, participants had the option of providing verbal and/or written feedback. During focus groups, participants gave feedback regarding the perceived accuracy of identified themes and sub-themes, identified new themes and sub-themes, and suggested names for and relationships between themes. Participants' feedback and interpretations were then integrated into the final coding scheme applied in the concluding analysis stage. During concluding analysis, eight participants were also involved in reviewing their own transcripts and individual narratives, a summary of results, and four short films produced as a part of this project as an additional form of member-checking.

3.5. Evaluative criteria

Grounded in narrative truths and a naturalistic inquiry paradigm, this research aims to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn, by following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendations for establishing trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiries. Recommended techniques applied in this study include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation of data sources and methods, and an audit trail. Participants' direct involvement in data analysis and member-checking also strengthen the credibility of the findings. Using participatory, digital narrative methods helped ensure that youths' voices and perspectives were maintained throughout the research process (Miller Scarnato, 2017).

4. Results

Results are organized into two broad categories in alignment with the research questions: barriers – the systems of oppression, experiences, and circumstances that pose a challenge to well-being – and bridges – the strategies, skills, and resources that facilitate well-being, even in the face of barriers. Videos co-produced with participants to illustrate these categories are provided as supplementary online material. Themes and sub-themes are organized by scale, moving from micro to macro. Comprehensive descriptions are provided for each theme, with direct participant quotes provided in text and in the supplementary videos.

4.1. Barriers

4.1.1. Changes in family arrangements

As immigrant youth, all of the participants shared the experience of adapting to new family arrangements after immigrating to New Orleans. This theme centers on difficulties in adjusting to the norms, expectations, and make-up of a new household. Many participants expressed the

difficulty or tension they experienced in learning to live with their parents and building a healthy relationship with them after years of being apart. Especially for participants whose parents had left when they were very young, becoming reacquainted with them was a long and arduous process. Participants described their difficulties in discovering and adjusting to their parents' lifestyles and expectations after years of being raised by grandparents, aunts, or other family members in their birth countries as the following quote demonstrates:

> After so much time of not living with my mom, it was hard because I didn't really know how she was. I had never had the opportunity to see up close her attitudes, the way she lives, her lifestyle. So, it was really difficult because, to see her, what she does, or how she talks, how she expresses herself, it was something different and new for me. *(Since I Came Here, I'm a New Person)*

In some cases, participants felt their parents were overly strict and limited their freedom. In other cases, participants found their parents' values to be different from those with which they were raised.

Participants also described their experiences of meeting and getting to know family members in the U.S. (siblings and step-parents), and getting used to living with them. Oftentimes, participants knew little about their parents' new families before beginning to live with them in the U.S., and this brought up feelings of resentment and abandonment, as stated:

> We [my sister and I] found out [our mom had other kids] before we left from [our country]. Like, "Oh, you have little brothers." And I was so pissed, I was mad. I didn't like them, I was like, "You know what? I'm not gonna like those kids," I told her. I was like, "I don't like them." I was really mad because I felt in that moment that she left to make another family and forgot about us, you know? *(I Want to Be that Role Model)*.

In many cases, participants' stories conveyed mixed feelings about meeting siblings for the first time, and described the awkwardness or jealousy they felt in embracing them as part of the family. In addition to meeting and getting to know siblings, many participants also mentioned meeting and getting to know their mother's partners. This was a subject that was not often discussed in detail, even when probed, which might be indicative of ongoing strain or distance in those relationships.

Participants also struggled with being separated from family members in their birth countries. In many cases, participants were away from the loved ones who had raised them or been a significant part of their lives in their birth countries for the first time, and expressed how much they missed them. Learning to live apart from loved ones was a difficult part of adjusting to life in New Orleans that many participants experienced acutely at first, but reported that it got better with time, as described:

> At first, I wasn't used to it. It was too much. I was crying. I remember I went into the bathroom to cry and cry and cry because I missed my grandma. And my mom went and got me out of the bathroom and told me that it was normal, that I was going to miss her at first. But now, I'm used to it. And I feel better, yeah. *(I Don't Have to be Ashamed of Being Latina)*.

4.1.2. Educational barriers

School is one of the primary social spheres in which participants were embedded, and they shared experiences of many challenges and difficulties they experienced as Latinx immigrant students pursuing their education in the U.S. school system. Participants expressed mixed feelings about English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Participants shared how being part of an ESL program was beneficial when they were first learning English, but then became a hindrance from socializing with other students and taking more challenging classes, as one participant shared:

> I don't understand why you can't take advanced classes if you're in ESL. And that's something that I didn't like…It practically stops you because you're learning the same classes, the same concepts and all that, and that's something that limits you from doing other things, other classes, from taking other classes. *(I Wanted to Challenge Myself)*

ESL also negatively impacted participants' academic records since advanced classes provide the opportunity for a higher GPA. Participants also related that they felt more included in school after exiting ESL, when they had the opportunity to be "in regular classes with regular people" (*I Had to Move Forward)*.

Participants also shared how difficult it is for Latinx immigrant students to pursue their educational goals with limited support from school staff, local organizations, and family members. Participants' stories demonstrated the dire need for supportive school staff who are informed about educational opportunities available to immigrant students and make a concerted effort to reach Latinx students, as this participant emphasized:

> For counselors, please, do some research. Do research so that we can have opportunities…if I would have had a good counselor, I might have made it in school [college] right now, and not here. *(I Have Me Protecting Me)*.

Participants also spoke of the difficulty in locating organizations that assist Latinx students in the New Orleans area. Additionally, participants felt they could not rely on parents for academic support because their parents struggled to understand and didn't have experience with the U. S. school system.

As Latinx immigrant students who tended to come from low-income families with limited economic resources, participants reflected on the ways that migration status, educational policies, and socioeconomic background limited their higher education pursuits. In the state of Louisiana, immigrant students without permanent status are considered international students, leaving them with little financial support to attend college. Participants stressed how unfairly disadvantaged they felt by these circumstances for no matter how well they did in high school, their opportunities for higher education were limited by macro-level factors beyond their control. The following quote reflects a typical experience:

> Even though I graduated with honors, I was in a good percentage of my class, never got in trouble, always kept good grades, but I could never apply to TOPS [Taylor Opportunity Program for Students, a state scholarship for Louisiana residents] even though I had the qualifications, or FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid]. And even though I wanted to go to a good school here, money was a big factor in my life, which, you know, my mom, making probably minimum wage in the United States, couldn't provide. So, that's when it was like, "Ugh, damn it," you know? (*I Want to Be That Role Model*)

Without permanent status, participants were forced to finance their education out-of-pocket and many did not have the financial resources to do so. In other cases, participants had no choice but to work during college, which caused stress and difficulties in balancing responsibilities.

4.1.3. Challenges of a new sociocultural context

All participants migrated to New Orleans from Mexico or Central America – leaving a familiar sociocultural context for a new and unfamiliar one. This theme centers on participants' experiences of adjusting to the social and cultural context of New Orleans, where Latinx peoples are racialized. In the U.S. context, many participants were racialized as ethnic minorities for the first time. Participants felt that they were discriminated against or looked down on by others, overtly and covertly, because they were Latinx (racism) and/or because they were immigrants

(nativism). Participants' stories described how it felt to experience racist abuse from the dominant (White, American) group in society, and how this was damaging to their well-being, as this quote describes:

> Whenever we go to, let's say, buy food, we go to a restaurant, the people always look at us Hispanics and right away, they think that we're not going to pay or that we're just there to, I don't know. I don't know what their mentality is. But they always look at us like we're less than them. They are always going to feel like they're superior to others. *(I Had to Move Forward)*

Many of the experiences with racism and nativism participants described were through interactions with teachers and staff in participants' schools. According to participants, in addition to making explicitly racist statements, teachers and school staff underestimated them or had low expectations for them because they were Latinx and/or immigrants, reflecting implicit bias. One participant shared:

> [I think my counselor didn't believe in me] because I was Latina, because I spoke another language, because I don't know the customs of this country. Just because of the fact that someone's not American, they think that you're worthless, they think you're incompetent, they think you can't achieve it, you're not going to be successful in life. *(Since I Came Here, I'm a New Person)*

Participants also described what it is like to live in a monolingual society without speaking English, and the ways in which English hegemony is policed and maintained. Language stood out as a marker of cultural difference that made acclimating to New Orleans difficult, and marked participants as outsiders.

Participants also shared stories of encounters with other Latinx students who spent more time in the U.S. and seemed to internalize the values and beliefs of White, American society. Instead of Latinx students supporting one another in solidarity, participants described conflict and distance between Latinxs who grew up in the U.S. and those who arrived as teenagers. As one participant expressed:

> When a person has been in the United States for a long time, it's like they adapt so much to the other people, that when they see another Latino person, it's like they distance themselves. *(We Have to Put Our Hearts In It)*

Participants' stories of interactions with other Latinx students reflected how, in order to adapt to the U.S. sociocultural context, Latinx youth may internalize a social hierarchy that devalues Latinx cultures and identities.

Many stories emphasized the fear, uncertainty, and precarity that is a constant part of participants' lives in the U.S. as Latinx immigrants who are criminalized and targeted for removal. Participants were acutely aware of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's presence and activities in the Greater New Orleans area where several high-profile deportation cases have occurred in recent years (Hassan, 2019; Sledge, 2020). Living in a sociocultural context that criminalizes participants' identities was experienced as an everyday stressor. Participants described the ways in which the threat of becoming implicated with the criminal justice system negatively impacts their lives and forces them to live with uncertainty about the future as this excerpt demonstrates:

> Let's say things get worse with all the deportations and everything, and let's say next week, I get deported. All I've studied, all the sacrifices my mom did, working two jobs and everything, all the sweat and tears and everything we've gone through is gonna be for nothing just because they have to send us back, and I wasn't able to finish [college]. And you know, I'd have to probably start from scratch again. And I don't think it's fair, you know? *(I Wanted to Make Her Proud)*

Participants also described the pressure they felt to prove their worth and good intentions, in order to combat harmful stereotypes, political rhetoric, and media images that stir up fear of Latinx immigrants and criminalize them.

4.2. Bridges

4.2.1. Psychological supports

Participants described a number of strategies that drew on internal, psychological resources for mitigating stress and resolving problems. This theme shows the ways in which participants psychologically coped with identified barriers, demonstrating their ability to adapt to and alleviate stressful situations in order to maintain their well-being. Many participants shared stories of how they have learned and grown from adversity, and are able to rely on themselves to get through difficult times. Participants demonstrated their ability to make meaning from adverse experiences by focusing on the lessons they learned from them, and the ways that such experiences helped them to grow and improve. Many participants felt that the difficult things they had been through in the past made them stronger people today, who are more equipped to face current and future problems as this participant expressed:

> I feel like all the things that hurt me in the past are the ones that are making me strong now. Because if I think about it, and I remember them, I will be like "this taught me a lesson. To be someone that deserves to be strong. And deserves to be brave. To protect herself and to protect the loved ones." *(I'm always fighting for what I Want)*

In their *testimonios*, participants frequently recounted how they used positive self-talk to help them during challenging moments, made meaning from trauma and oppression, and did whatever was in their power to protect themselves from adversity (as exemplified by the titular quote of one participant's *testimonio*: "I have me protecting me").

Participants also related accounts of practicing gratitude as a means of staying positive in the face of difficulties. In particular, participants professed gratitude for the sacrifices their parents made to bring them to the United States. Rather than focusing on the opportunities that they do *not* have, participants tended to focus on those they *do* have by virtue of living in the United States, as reflected here:

> I tell myself…"Think about where you were a few years ago, and now you're here. Thank God. Other young people don't have the opportunity to be here. They're in other countries, and they don't even leave there. They get married, they drop out of school. And well, here there are more possibilities." …Maybe think about your parents, who paid the price for you to have a better life, see how hard they work and always have debts. It's like, think about that. *(I Don't Have to Be Ashamed of Being Latina)*

Goal-setting was also described by participants as a means of staying focused on moving toward future aspirations instead of being dragged down by problems. Many participants felt that staying focused on what they envision for the future helped to maintain their well-being during difficult times. The following quote illustrates this idea:

> I think you have to keep working. Like I said, where you are now isn't where you're going to be forever. And it depends on you if you move up or if you move down. You have to have ambitions that fill you with positivity. *(I Try to See the Bigger Picture)*

For many participants, establishing and focusing on objectives and ambitions was a means of maintaining a positive, future-oriented outlook.

Additionally, participants described using positive distractions to manage stress. Participants talked about the activities that they do to remove themselves from stressful situations and avoid negative thought patterns, as one participant explained:

> There are people that turn to vices to make themselves feel better. They drink alcohol, they do drugs, but not me. My distraction is sometimes talking with someone, with a girl my age. Or if not, I go

> out alone when I want to be alone. I ride my bike, and just that, listening to music, and then I forget about the problem by being out on the street, and when I remember it, well, it doesn't matter. *(I'm Good the Way I Am)*.

Participants described engaging in activities like art-making, cleaning, reading, and listening to music when they are feeling stressed. Some participants also described using humor to lighten a situation, as expressed in this quote (*I Want to Be that Role Model)*: "I always try to shift the situation from something negative to something positive that's gonna lighten up the mood and just make you laugh, make you smile. Just giggle and you're good. Just laugh and you're good.".

4.2.2. Relational supports

A significant feature of all participants' stories was the important role that relationships played in supporting and guiding them during hard times. First and foremost, participants stressed their strong ties to family members, and the vital support that the love of their families provides. Many participants described close relationships with immediate and extended family members, and recounted that they turn to family members for guidance and understanding when facing challenges. One participant shared:

> My source of strength right now is always going to be my grandma. Everything that I do, I always do it thinking about her because she was always there for me. *(You Don't Have to Change)*.

Participants also shared that spending time with family helps them to feel better during difficult times, as exemplified here:

> Another thing that helps me to feel better is spending time with my family, I think. When something is wrong, I go now to be with my baby brother, or to hug my mom or my sister, and that helps me. *(I Wanted to Challenge Myself)*

Although participants had experienced changes in family structures, they described a variety of familial relationships as instrumental to their well-being. Family relationships characterized by love and support were a significant bridge to well-being.

Participants also stressed the crucial support that people outside of the family are able to provide – most often, teachers and mentors. Almost all participants expressed great appreciation for teachers and mentors who helped them and felt that it was important to seek out those supportive adults, as the following quote reflects:

> I've had mentors, I've had teachers from high school that helped me, you know. There are people out there that care about you and care that you achieve your dreams and that you do something better for yourself. *(I Wanted to Make Her Proud)*.

Some participants also described the ways that peers provide encouragement and support:

> A friend from my church, her name is Jennifer, and she is a person I can tell all of my personal issues to, and I know that she is going to give me good advice. And she's going to tell me, "[Name], this is not right." Or, "[Name], I'm here to support you in this." …And she helps me to feel better about things that perhaps I don't feel good about. *(If You're Going to Do Something, You Have to Put Your Heart in It)*.

Stories of the ways that clubs, sports teams, and organizations were helpful were also frequently shared. Getting involved with soccer teams, clubs at school, and non-profit organizations helped participants feel more connected to their new home, and capable of accomplishing their dreams. Participants reported that these social activities allowed them to make friends, feel more rooted in their communities, and learn more about themselves. These activities were also a healthy outlet for venting emotions, and helped participants to express themselves and gain self-confidence. The following quote exemplifies this experience:

> Because I was very outgoing, and I'm into sports, like I'm really into sports, I was playing soccer in 8th grade, and I met a bunch of kids from there and they would speak to me in English and they would do their best to try to understand me. I felt more welcome…. We're more than just a team. It feels like we're friends, we're family. And they make it safe for me to talk if I need to talk. And so, I think that's one of the main outlets. *(I Have me Protecting Me)*

4.2.3. Cultural supports

This theme includes participants' descriptions of cultural resources that provide strength and support in the face of difficulty. These supports seemed to stem from participants' sense of being grounded in their own cultures. As first-generation immigrant youth, participants found pride in their connection to the culture of their home countries, which was a source of strength that bolstered their resilience. They recognized the value of being rooted in the language, customs, and norms of diverse Latinx cultures, and the ways in which their bicultural identities enhance their self-worth, as described in this quote:

> And Latino people, we can do many things, you know? And I feel like we are more capable of doing many things than the American people because we know what it means to suffer, what it means to have to work every day and every night…I think that people who are bilingual are more qualified for more things because they understand how to live in two worlds, let's say. So, they get ideas from one, they get ideas from the other. *(I Had to Move Forward)*

Participants also expressed appreciation for the sense of shared experience and solidarity they felt with other Latinx people from their own countries and beyond, and the importance of giving back to the Latinx community. Many participants shared the idea that giving back to others, especially others like them, is a way of paying forward the help that they received in times of need. The following quote exemplifies this notion:

> [One of my goals] is to make a change in society, and to be able to help students in the future, immigrant students like me, with my experience of being one and now knowing the opportunities that they're missing out on to be able to fulfill them in the future. *(I Try to See the Bigger Picture)*

Many participants shared that they turned to God, the Bible, and church for strength during tough moments. As one participant explained:

> Church became a very deep part of me, a big part of my identity, of the way I approach myself…That's when I started becoming a little bit more focused, becoming a little bit more centered in my identity as a leader, and identity as loving myself because of how I talk, because of my accent, and because I'm here to stay here no matter what. *(I Want to Be That Role Model)*.

Other participants shared a sense of spiritual beliefs that helped them find a sense of purpose and meaning in their experiences. Still others shared the ways that their cultural and spiritual values guided their actions and helped them to stay true to themselves in challenging circumstances.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to the limited understanding of Latinx youth in new Latinx destinations by presenting and analyzing youth's firsthand accounts of the multi-level factors influencing their well-being. By centering the voices of non-citizen Latinx immigrant youth, the research sheds light on what they perceive to be barriers and bridges to well-being in a distinctive socio-cultural context – a new Latinx destination in the South. Considering these findings through a PVEST framework helps provide a nuanced understanding of how Latinx youth drew on

psychological, social, and spiritual resources to cope with the stress and difficulties associated with adapting to new family arrangements, confronting barriers to educational advancement, and integrating into a new sociocultural context.

Through the lens of PVEST, the barriers and bridges revealed in this study provide non-pathologizing insights on how participants "engage their own vulnerability and discern protective resources that support their resilience" (Spencer et al., 2019, p. 111). From a PVEST perspective, it is important to understand that the difficult process of migrating to a new country as a child or adolescent is a shared prior experience amongst participants contributing to their net vulnerability levels. Participants' digital *testimonios* conveyed how vital family connections were physically severed and emotionally strained by migration flows from Mexico and Central America to the U.S. coupled with anti-immigrant policies. Decades of research have affirmed the importance of parent–child bonds for healthy child development and long-term health outcomes (Bowlby, 2008; Moretti & Peled, 2004). Thus, being separated from parents for long periods of time is a clear, but not insurmountable, risk factor for healthy human development (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012) that all participants faced. As a result, rebuilding those relationships and adapting to new family arrangements was a major barrier to attaining and maintaining well-being for participants, contributing to their net stress engagement.

In the school context, participants faced stressors that inhibited their educational attainment, which can result in negative outcomes for Latinx youth (Diaz-Strong, 2021; Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; Roth, 2017). These stressors are supported by research focused on Latinx students in other new Latinx destinations, and include: limited institutional support and low expectations for Latinx students (Michaels, 2014) and state-level policies on financial aid and tuition for foreign-born students that, coupled with participants' socio-economic status, delayed, complicated, or barred their access to higher education and the social opportunities it affords (Roth, 2017; Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020). Participants also described feeling disadvantaged and segregated by school policies that forced their enrollment in language-learning programs rooted in English hegemony and prevented them from enrolling in advanced courses, which is consistent with ESL student experiences in other areas (Daoud, 2003; Wood, 2008). These cumulative stressors may place Latinx students at risk for mental health concerns (Garcini et al., 2022; Gonzales et al., 2013; Nienhusser & Romandia, 2022) and discontinuing their education (Reynolds et al., 2010; Rodriguez, 2018) which can result in restricted socio-economic mobility (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017; Marrow, 2020).

Participants' digital *testimonios* also demonstrated how the racialization and criminalization of Latino immigrants in the U.S. posed significant risks to their well-being. Participants experienced oppression directed at their intersectional identities as members of the Latinx racial group in the U.S. and as immigrants born outside of the U.S. From a PVEST perspective, participants identified "context relevant privileging conditions" (Spencer et al., 2019, p. 115) linked to White skin color and U.S. nativity that placed them in subordinate positions, manifested through racism, nativism, and internalized oppression as well as the norming of anti-immigrant sentiment and stereotypes (Brown et al., 2018). The detrimental health impacts of racism, nativism, and other interlocking systems of oppression are gaining recognition in social science research (Garcini et al., 2022; Gonzales et al., 2013; Nienhusser & Romandia, 2022; S. Rodriguez, 2020) and this study's findings underscore the salience of such experiences for Latinx youth in a new Latinx destination in the South.

In alignment with the strengths-based perspective of social work, PVEST holds that "human vulnerability requires skillful coping with planned and unexpected challenge" (Spencer et al., 2019, p. 116). This study found that participants engaged in a variety of coping strategies by drawing on internal and external resources and supports available to them from the micro-level to the macro-level to mitigate risks. Through a PVEST lens, these findings help researchers and practitioners to understand the assets, resources, coping skills, and positive meaning-making processes that support Latinx youth's resilience and well-being as they navigate the challenges, stressors, and traumas identified across multiple contexts in a newer Latinx destination. Consistent with existing theoretical models of adolescent resilience, psychological resources proved valuable in helping youth navigate, cope with, and persist in the face of trauma, stress, and oppression (Endler, 1997; Patterson & McCubbin, 1987). The protective role of connections to family, friends, educators, mentors, and clubs/organizations is supported by extant literature in new Latinx destinations (Brietzke & Perreira, 2017; Held et al., 2018; Silver, 2015) and this study's findings attest to the value of these *meso*-level relationships for Latinx youth in New Orleans.

Finally, PVEST posits that one's beliefs and perceptions about the risks one experiences and the resources available to mitigate them are central to the identity development process (Velez & Spencer, 2018). This study revealed that cultural pride and solidarity, spiritual beliefs, and moral values acted as supports for participants, helping them form emergent identities that affirmed their self-worth, strengths, and capabilities as Latinx young people. This study enhances our understanding of the resilience and well-being of Latinx youth in a new Latinx destinations, emphasizing the significance of internal and external resources and sources of support.

5.1. Conclusions and implications

This study underscores the crucial need to understand and address the barriers to well-being Latinx youth confront as they transition into adulthood, particularly within the anti-immigrant context prevalent in new Latinx destinations in the southern United States. While participants encountered difficulties in adapting to shifts in family dynamics, confronted educational barriers in the school environment, and grappled with assimilation into a new sociocultural context marked by racialization and marginalization, their digital testimonios highlighted their resilience in adeptly tapping into psychological, relational, and cultural supports. The empirical insights provided by this research significantly add to limited knowledge about the experiences of Latinx immigrant youth in new Latinx destinations by contributing to understandings of the contextual factors that shape their well-being.

Based on these findings, efforts to promote the resilience and well-being of Latinx youth through research, practice, and policy are warranted and essential to improving health and social outcomes for this growing population. While this narrative inquiry resulted in richly detailed stories from participants, their experiences of course do not represent the experiences of all Latinx youth living in the Greater New Orleans area, nor other new Latinx destinations. This cross-sectional study provides insight into participants' experiences at one point in time. Longitudinal research is needed to understand how participants' experiences and narratives may change over time. Observational research is also warranted to triangulate these findings, which may reveal potential barriers and bridges to well-being not discussed in participants' digital *testimonios*. Additionally, the perspectives and experiences of younger Latinx youth may be different from those of the participants of 18–21 years of age in this study, and future research might capture unique barriers and bridges, and/or developmentally specific information about their well-being. Further research is needed to extend upon these findings in New Orleans and other areas, and draw comparisons based on varying geographic contexts.

Practitioners and service providers must recognize the importance of Latinx youth's identities as sources of both vulnerability and strength, and actively work against racism and nativism in policy and practice. Findings suggest that there is an important opportunity for educators and service providers, especially in educational contexts, to be a positive intervention in the lives of Latinx young people. This study's findings also suggest that advocacy and policy change are needed to reduce the barriers to well-being Latinx youth face. State-level policies that facilitate higher educational attainment for Latinx youth can help promote

social and economic mobility amongst this population (Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; Roth, 2017). Of vital importance to the well-being of these participants and others like them is the need for comprehensive immigration reform that provides a pathway to citizenship for Latinx immigrant youth and their families.

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.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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