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Familism attitudes, behaviors, and adjustment during adolescence

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Abstract

In the past two decades in the United States, research has surged on *familism*, a multidimensional construct encompassing attitudes and behaviors related to strong attachment, identification, and obligation to the family. In this article, we define familism and argue that it is a crucial way for adolescents to contribute to their social world and achieve a sense of role fulfillment. We also present examples from key studies highlighting the advantages and potential challenges of familism for adolescent adjustment. Lastly, we discuss conceptual and methodological issues to advance the study of familism.

KEYWORDS

adolescent development, attitudinal familism, behavioral familism

Familism has long been acknowledged as an important multidimensional construct related to attitudes and behaviors reflecting a strong orientation toward the family (Baca Zinn, 1982). Attitudinal and behavioral familism has been documented as important to youth's well-being, particularly when they face stressors linked with social marginalization. However, conflicting research findings on the effects of familism on adolescent adjustment highlight the need for a more nuanced exploration of the concept. In this article, we define familism and argue for its developmental significance during adolescence. We then present empirical evidence from key studies in the United States to illustrate the advantages and challenges of familism. We conclude with recommendations for conceptual and methodological approaches to research on adolescent familism.

DEFINING FAMILISM

Familism is a multidimensional construct that involves a strong identification with, attachment to, and sense of obligation to the family (Cahill et al., 2021). *Attitudinal familism* is the internalization that the well-being and interconnectedness of the family is a priority. Across various measures, scholars have consistently captured dimensions of familism related to support, obligations, respect, and referent. Family support has often been used to mean having reliable providers of support,

attachment, and interconnectedness within the family (e.g., "One can count on help from his/her relatives to solve most problems," Sabogal et al., 1987, p. 402). Obligations to the family entail having a sense of duty to assist the family (e.g., "Help your parents financially in the future," Fuligni et al., 1999, p. 1034). Respect and honor are the notion that an individual must respect the family and consider how behaviors and attitudes reflect on the family (e.g., "No matter what, children should always treat their parents with respect," Knight et al., 2010, p. 472). Lastly, an individual should consider the needs and interests of the family (family referent; e.g., "A person should be a good person for the sake of his or her own family," Steidel & Contreras, 2003, p. 328).

Whereas attitudinal familism relates to the psychological internalization of the importance of the family, *behavioral familism* relates to the physical enactments of prioritizing the family (Hernández & Bámaca-Colbert, 2016; Stein et al., 2014). The measurement of and methods for assessing adolescent familism behaviors are not as cohesive. The predominant approach has focused on quantifying aspects of assistance, including instrumental support (e.g., translating or interpreting documents), caregiving support (e.g., caring for siblings, helping siblings with schoolwork), household support (e.g., cleaning the home, cooking a meal, running errands), and financial support (e.g., working to help pay for expenses, assisting parents at their work, working in the family business; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006;

Tseng, 2004). In addition, some studies have measured time spent together with family members—although this has not typically been considered behavioral familism (e.g., Ackert & Wikle, 2022; Zeiders et al., 2016). Family time is thought to be the manifestation of family attachment and interconnectedness, as well as the enactment of prioritizing time with kin over other activities. Both family assistance behaviors and time spent with family have typically been measured using daily diary checklists (Fuligni et al., 2002; Sasser et al., 2021; Telzer et al., 2014; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009a, 2009b; Tsai et al., 2013).

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILISM DURING ADOLESCENCE

Familism is particularly influential during adolescence, when youth have a fundamental need to contribute and require meaningful opportunities to feel needed and useful (Fuligni, 2019; Stein et al., 2014). Familism can be an important and safe avenue for youth to make genuine contributions and gain a sense of role fulfillment (Telzer et al., 2010). Helping the family and being attentive to the needs of the group facilitate other important developmental competencies of maturity and intimacy that parents may see as valuable for adolescents to carry into adulthood (Kuperminc et al., 2009). Familism may also help establish a supportive yet firm family structure that limits youth's exposure to and the influence of risky behaviors (Schwartz, 2007). Moreover, familism is thought to elicit a commitment to honor and give back to the family through educational and occupational attainments and by avoiding bringing shame to the family through problem behaviors (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Familism values and behaviors are especially salient among youth from immigrant, ethnic-minority, and low-income backgrounds. Immigrant youth, particularly those from more collectivistic countries of origin, place greater importance on attitudinal and behavioral familism than do nonimmigrant youth (Tseng, 2004), regardless of gender (Juang & Cookston, 2009; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009a). Much research on ethnic differences in familism in the United States has concentrated on Latinx families (Cahill et al., 2021), although studies have also identified other similar constructs, such as filial piety among Asian American youth (Yeh & Bedford, 2003) and communalism among Black and African American youth (Boykin et al., 1997; Jagers & Mock, 1995). Compared to their non-Hispanic White counterparts, Latinx adults of Central American, Cuban American, and Mexican American origin hold stronger familism values (Sabogal et al., 1987) and Mexican American adolescents in high school assist their families almost twice as much in time and number of days spent helping (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009a, 2009b). Adolescents of Filipino, Chinese, and Asian American backgrounds from middle to high school age also report a stronger emphasis

on prioritizing, respecting, and caring for family than their White peers (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2023; Fuligni et al., 1999; Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Leu et al., 2012; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009a). Although less research has been conducted on Black youth, studies of familism that include Black high school- and college-aged youth also consistently show the significance of family and interdependence as a cultural value (Armstrong-Carter, 2023; Boykin et al., 1997; Jagers & Mock, 1995).

Among youth from these backgrounds, prioritizing and contributing to the family is often embedded as an adaptive cultural value amid social and systemic marginalization (Coll et al., 1996; White et al., 2018). Youth turn to and depend on the family as a source of increased support during trying times and experiences (Stein et al., 2015). Emphasizing the importance of the family may inculcate a meaningful connection to one's ethnic heritage and facilitate feelings of unity, acceptance, and pride (Branscombe et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2006). The orientation toward the family may be rooted in collectivistic ideologies and cultures in which schemas of the self are thought to be related to, connected with, and interdependent with others (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2010). This view suggests that the inherent connection individuals share is made meaningful through interdependent relationships, desires, and goals (Triandis et al., 1990).

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF FAMILISM FOR ADOLESCENT ADJUSTMENT

Familism values and behaviors have promotive effects, increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes and trajectories, as well as protective effects, buffering against the influence of negative experiences for youth. However, in some contexts, familism can be challenging for youth. Next, we outline some key findings that highlight the impact of familism on adolescents' psychological, interpersonal, and academic adjustment.

Promotive effects

Research has predominately found promotive effects of familism on academic and interpersonal outcomes, both of which are important domains for adolescents to contribute to their families' current and future well-being. School is a critical context where adolescents can fulfill their familial obligations. Indeed, in studies with predominantly Mexican-origin urban and rural families, greater endorsement of familism values among seventh to 12th graders has been associated with improved academic aspirations, engagement, effort, attendance, persistence, and attachment (e.g., Aretakis et al., 2015; Esparza & Sánchez, 2008; Gonzales et al., 2008;



Hernández et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2015). While managing behavioral familism tasks may affect youth's time with peers, urban Chinese American high schoolers demonstrated the ability to successfully manage these tasks on days when they completed schoolwork, and neither behavioral familism nor balancing competing demands was associated with psychological distress (Fuligni et al., 2002). In fact, increases in behavioral familism tasks among urban Chinese American high schoolers were related to decreasing symptoms of depression (Juang & Cookston, 2009).

Familism can also strengthen positive interpersonal skills both inside and outside the family. Latinx and Asian adolescents from urban areas who endorsed greater attitudinal familism exhibited higher levels of prosocial behavior toward others (Calderón et al., 2011; Carlo & Padilla-Walker, 2020; Zhao et al., 2022), enjoyed more cohesive family relationships (Stein et al., 2014), maintained more positive relationships with both family and peers (Fuligni et al., 1999), and exhibited greater support-seeking coping strategies (Stein et al., 2020). These positive outcomes may be related to the cooperative and interdependent principles of familism.

Protective effects

Familism has often served as a protective factor against externalizing symptoms during adolescence. Across studies with Latinx fifth to 10th graders from families with low incomes, youth who endorsed higher levels of familism were not as susceptible to the effects of negative peer affiliations and norms on externalizing symptoms (Germán et al., 2009; Milan & Wortel, 2015; Roosa et al., 2011; Telzer et al., 2014). Moreover, Mexican-origin urban youth with more attitudinal familism engaged in less risky behavior across adolescence, when risk taking tends to increase (Wheeler et al., 2017). Among Mexican-American urban high schoolers, familism values have also been linked to reduced substance use through increased adolescent disclosure of their activities to their parents (Telzer et al., 2014).

Researchers have also examined whether familism protects against the effects of stress on youth's psychological and physical well-being. In studies, familism values mitigated the negative effects of high levels of perceived stress on subjective physical health and cortisol levels among older urban adolescents from Latinx, European, and East Asian American backgrounds (Corona et al., 2017; Sladek et al., 2019). Engaging in familism behaviors during the day was also associated with healthier physical and psychological well-being the following day, as evidenced by lower levels of waking cortisol and flatter diurnal slopes in college-aged Latinx urban youth (Doane et al., 2018). Additionally, high familism values predicted fewer symptoms of depression among high school and college students of Mexican

ancestry facing acculturative stress related to integrating host and heritage cultures (Cheng et al., 2016). Familism has also been explored as a protective factor against the effects of discrimination on risky behaviors and symptoms of depression among Mexican-origin families, although findings from studies of adolescents (Stein et al., 2015; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2011) have been less robust than findings from studies of adults (Curci et al., 2023; Wheeler et al., 2021). This may be because in the developmental stage of adolescence, the protective role of familism against discrimination may not be fully realized since youth are still developing their familism values and behaviors (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2011).

Challenges

While familism has been associated with various benefits, some research has highlighted diminished or negative effects of familism in difficult contexts. In adverse family environments caused by economic and social conditions (e.g., poverty, structural racism), adolescents may assume adult roles and responsibilities for the survival of the family that become too much for them at their developmental stage. As a result, adolescents may have to sacrifice developmentally appropriate goals, such as forming friendships and engaging in academics (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). For instance, extremely high endorsement of familism values has been linked to as low or even lower grades in school than the lowest levels of familism endorsement among Asian, Latinx, and White high schoolers (Fuligni et al., 1999), and family obligations, compared to family cohesion, predicted lower grade point averages in Latinx high schoolers from metropolitan cities (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2019). Similarly, more time spent on behavioral familism tasks, such as financial and language assistance, detracted from the college achievement of first- and second-generation immigrant youth whose families had fewer socioeconomic resources (Tseng, 2004).

Relational dynamics within the family also play a role in the impact of familism on youth's adjustment. In households marked by high levels of conflict, youth may not be able to reap the benefits of their familism values and behaviors due to the challenging family environment. For instance, Mexican-origin urban adolescents in homes with high levels of parent-child conflict who engaged in family assistance behaviors had higher rates of substance use (Telzer et al., 2014). Latinx students ranging from middle school- to college-aged with declining perceptions of the fairness and reciprocity of their contributions to their family experienced increased psychological distress (Kuperminc et al., 2009; Patel & Stein, 2023; Toro et al., 2019). Moreover, the positive effects of both attitudinal and behavioral familism, as measured by family time, on symptoms of depression were evident only when levels of

parental acceptance and parent–child affection were high among college-aged Korean-origin youth and middle-school-aged Mexican-origin youth (Lee & Solheim, 2018; Zeiders et al., 2016). Older adolescents with high familism values experienced more challenging symptoms of depression and lower levels of life satisfaction when they reported high levels of conformity to parental expectations and low differentiation of the self (Lee & Solheim, 2018). These findings highlight the intricate interplay among autonomy, interdependence, fairness, and the prioritization of the family during the developmental period of adolescence.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we examined the complexities of the multidimensional construct of familism and their implications for adolescents' adjustment and well-being. Research underscores the significant role of the family in adolescent development across numerous cultures in the United States. For marginalized youth from ethnic-minority, immigrant, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, both attitudinal and behavioral familism values may hold particular importance in fostering positive psychological and academic adjustment amid social and systemic obstacles. However, the varied findings regarding the impact of familism on adolescents' adjustment highlight the need for careful consideration of contextual factors. Researchers should dedicate continued attention to familism as a promising avenue for interdisciplinary research and intervention.

LOOKING AHEAD

Continued research on familism can contribute novel scientific insights on how to effectively leverage the benefits of familism for youth from different backgrounds, at both individual and systemic levels. Specifically, researchers need to expand the scope of this work to encompass a broader variety of populations, establish a cohesive approach to studying behavioral familism, and consider developmental and systemic influences on familism.

Many studies on familism in the United States emerged as a strengths-based response to research on the development of marginalized youth, primarily with Latinx youth, which was deficit-based (Cahill et al., 2021). Researchers should expand the field's understanding of familism's role among Black and Indigenous youth and within-group differences among Asian youth (Choi et al., 2021; Plaut, 2010). Furthermore, we know little about whether and how familism may relate to positive development in ethnically and racially marginalized youth and in youth with other intersecting

identities, such as gender, age, nativity, rural or urban background, and socioeconomic status. For instance, findings are mixed on the effect of cultural socialization of gender roles and manifestations of familism (e.g., domestic work, financial support; Cahill et al., 2021; Ovink, 2014), while variations within adolescence raise questions about the changing balance of role fulfillment and agency in familism (e.g., Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Kho et al., 2023). The effects and correlates of familism may vary across these intersecting identities as a result of evolving cultural traditions, economic conditions, and experiences of marginalization within the broader society. Incorporating global perspectives and insights from research on family primacy may be a fruitful way to deepen our understanding of the role of familism (e.g., Mucchi-Faina et al., 2010; Yeh et al., 2013).

The field needs a consistent way to measure behavioral familism that recognizes a broader array of behaviors. This will help us better assess and understand the contextual processes that likely contribute to the mixed findings on familism. For instance, the detrimental effects of behavioral familism may be because of the opportunity cost of having less time to spend on other developmental experiences, such as deepening friendships. Alternatively, the weight or stress of specific assistance behaviors (e.g., translating important documents for parents vs. completing a household chore) may affect youth negatively. Researchers can also consider assessing additional behaviors related to familism, such as time spent with family (e.g., Sasser et al., 2021), emotional support giving, and educational and occupational decision-making, all of which can be examined through ecological momentary assessment (the assessment of participants' behaviors in their natural environments and in real time).

Lastly, to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by youth in contributing to their families, we need research on the mechanisms and consequences of system-level barriers. Scholars have proposed theoretical conceptualizations to explain how familism may be helpful through role fulfillment, feeling needed and useful, and contributing meaningfully, or may be challenging because of overwhelming family demands driven by family-level factors (e.g., caregivers' employment, physical illness). However, many of these mechanisms have not been tested empirically. We need more direct investigation into the possibility and ramifications of youth wanting to assist their families but being unable to due to systemic barriers. For instance, youth may face significant family responsibilities because of income inequality and structural racism that limit their parents' ability to work fewer hours or secure less physically demanding jobs (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018; Manduca, 2018). Additionally, education, considered a pathway to bring honor to the family and provide future financial support, can be impeded by inequalities in academic resources and opportunities. Disparities in college graduation rates, particularly among Black and Latinx students,

result from factors like direct and indirect marginalization and insufficient support (Benner et al., 2018). Shifting the focus to consider the mechanisms that help explain youth's familism values and behaviors can inform interventions and policies that promote equity and support marginalized youth.

In conclusion, attitudinal and behavioral familism can have a positive impact on adolescent development by providing increased social support, facilitating meaningful and fulfilling roles, and promoting a commitment to family well-being. At the same time, the challenges faced by families as a result of marginalization, immigrant status, and socioeconomic background may make it difficult for youth to fully reap the positive impact of familism on their adjustment. These findings underscore the significance of considering contextual factors, particularly family environments and systemic forces in the United States. Although it is not within the scope of this review, considering global conceptualizations of family primacy will also build on our understanding of the contextual conditions that influence familism, such as the dual filial piety model (Yeh, 2003; Yeh & Bedford, 2003) that differentiates authoritarianism from reciprocity (Bedford & Yeh, 2021).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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