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Hispanic and Latino communities in Salem Oregon: Outdoor recreational programs and childhood obesity

*Over the past decade, Oregon's growth rate of the Hispanic and Latino¹ population has surpassed that of the national growth rate. Hispanic and Latino youth are the group most at risk for being overweight, and thus experience a higher susceptibility for childhood obesity. This research examines the Hispanic and Latino population's absence in **dominant public health discourses**, and their children's susceptibility to poor health conditions in Oregon. This study first explores local outdoor recreation program's commitment and incorporation of family-based recreational activities in Salem, Oregon. This study further discusses how parental **gatekeeping**, and the dynamic status of the home environment influences Hispanic and Latino youth's interaction with the outdoors. Issues of race, privilege, and **environmental, economic, and intergenerational justice** are considered in this study. Evidence indicates the YMCA was the only outdoor program that incorporated family-based recreational activities, while the Oregon 4-H center was the only outdoor program committed to engaging with the Hispanic and Latino youth. Findings also highlight how parental habits, including feeding practices, and neighborhood security and accessibility to recreational locations impact Hispanic and Latino youth's accessibility to outdoor activities. Communal efforts are needed to improve Hispanic and Latino communities' representation in dominant white discourses that involve environmental justice, and recreational outdoor programs, to improve lifestyle habits, physical activity and reduce youth susceptibility to childhood obesity. Further research is necessary to determine how local radio station **agenda setting**, communication style and narrative framework, shape current attitudes and behaviors towards the outdoors, within Hispanic and Latino families.*

Key Words: Dominant discourse, gatekeeping, environmental justice, economic justice, intergenerational justice, agenda setting.

¹ According to world atlas and Merriam Webster Dictionary, Hispano(a) is any person who has descended from a Spanish speaking country. While Latino(a) refers any person whose country of origin is in Latin America. In this context, the Hispanic and Latino population refers to any person who lives in the United States, and has family descendants from Latin America or Spain.

Oregon's population is composed of 12.8 percent of Hispanic and Latinos, while 76.4 percent are white, non-Hispanic or Latino (census.gov). White, non-Hispanic or Latino make up more than three fourths of Oregon's population, raising the following question: is the disproportion in population representation, also seen with health conditions, such as obesity? Approximately one third (32.4%) of the Hispanic and Latino population in Oregon are obese, while nearly one quarter (29%) among white, non-Hispanic and Latino are obese (stateofobesity.org). Oregon's Hispanic and Latino population has grown by 72 percent since the year of 2000, compared to only 50 percent nationwide (oregoncf.org). This disproportion between obese Hispanic and Latino vs. white, non-Hispanic or Latino adults is also reflected in children. Hispanic and Latino children from ages six to eleven are two times more likely to be overweight or obese at 25 percent, compared to 13.6 percent of white, non-Hispanic and Latino children (The Office of Minority Health). Given the disproportional health impacts between Hispanic and Latino children compared to white-non-Hispanic and Latino children, in this research project, I seek to explore how recreational outdoor programs, parental imprint, home environments, and the media, influence Hispanic and Latino youth's physical activity and thus, susceptibility for childhood obesity. Furthermore, I consider issues of race, privilege, and environmental, economic and intergenerational justice. Coming from an immigrant family, and being a Mexican immigrant myself, it is essential to raise awareness of how the Hispanic and Latino population are being represented and heard in predominant white spaces in Oregon.

In Salem Oregon, there exist a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities to engage youth, yet, very few are committed to engage one of the most vulnerable populations to

childhood obesity; the Hispanic and Latino community. The city of Salem provides annual summer program camps, sports camps, and nature camps, such as the introduction to the wilderness survival and an advance wilderness survival course (cityofsalem.net). Trickle creek, an outdoor school, offers local youth with recreational opportunities that include hiking, bird watching, and much more during the school year (nwoutdoorschool.org). The YMCA provides hiking opportunities such as camp Greider and camp Silver Creek, with additional family-based outdoor activities (theyonline.org). However, the Oregon Head, Heart, Hands and Health center, or also known as the Oregon 4-H center; is the only outdoor program designed to engage local Hispanic and Latino youth from grades three to eight (oregon4hcenter.org). This **environmental injustice**², or disproportionate number of outreach programs designed to target and engage a population most at risk, demonstrates the indirect burdens this population is prone to suffer, such as having a higher susceptibility for childhood obesity. It is significant to emphasize, that aside from the YMCA, many of these recreational outdoor programs lacked involving both the family and youth to experience and interact with nature together.

Advocating for the current Hispanic and Latino youth in the Salem community can not only have tremendous impact to their own health, but also, create a healthy future for upcoming generations to come. This principle of **intergenerational justice**³, of creating a sustainable future for the unborn generations, is demonstrated by the Latino outdoors program. Unlike other statewide recreational programs, the Latino outdoor program, emphasizes the significance of *cultura y familia* [culture and family] (latinooutdoors.org). This program aims to connect both first and second generation Hispanic and Latino families (latinooutdoors.org). Including, going a

step further to connect Hispanic and Latino college students with environmental conservation mentors (latinooutdoors.org).

²Environmental Justice refers to the just treatment of all people regardless of their race, color, nationality, economic income etc. in respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws (Pezullo, 2018).

³Intergenerational Justice is a principle of Principle of fairness, not only children and adults but also between the unborn generations to come (Pezullo, 2018).

Being aware of our culture, heritage and history, this program has also created a blog, titled “Yo cuento outdoors” [I story tell outdoors], in which participants, volunteers, and others share their reflection about their first outdoor experience with the program (latinooutdoors.org).

Despite the few number of recreational outdoor programs designed for Hispanic and Latino youth, and the lack of family based recreational activities, it is also important to take into consideration how parental imprint influences the Hispanic and Latino youth interaction with the outdoors. More specifically, the **gatekeeping**⁴ role of parents, in deciding what information, practices, cultural attitudes and beliefs get inside the house and passed on to their children, and what is kept out, can have an impact to the overall health of Hispanic and Latino youth.

According to a 2016 study, titled “Determinants of Obesity in the Hispanic Preschool Population: An Integrative Review” by Innella et al., there exists a decrease in Latino preschool children’s physical activity and an increase in the maternal body mass index. These findings indicate a relationship between the feeding practices from the mother with the level of physical activity of the child (Innella Nancy et al, 2015). A 2010 study, titled “Parent and child physical activity and sedentary time: do active parents foster active children?” by Jago, Russell et al., reported that girls are 3.67 times more at risk to watch four hours or more of TV per day, if the parent has watched two to four hours of TV per day as well (Jago Russell et al, 2010). As for boys, they are 10.47 times more likely, which is more than twice the risk for girls (Jago Russell et al, 2010). Parental habits and TV viewing highly reflects upon the healthy lifestyle of their

children, their level of physical activity and susceptibility for childhood obesity. Based on this evidence, there exists a necessity to incorporate family-based recreational activities in outdoor programs, to engage both the parent and child in physical activities together.

⁴Gatekeeping are the decisions editors and media managers make focus on certain environmental stories (Pezullo, 2018). In this context, the gatekeeping role of the parent refers to parents acting like editors and media managers and deciding the type of information, practices and beliefs allowed inside the house and passed on to their children, and what is kept out.

Although parents are perceived to be the main decision makers, and who have a great influence on how their children view, and value nature, it is also crucial to consider how the home environment itself, impacts Hispanic and Latino youth physical activity. A 2013 Marion County health equity report titled, “Making a Difference” stated, that on average, white, non-Hispanic or Latino individuals earned almost double the wage to what an Asian person would make, \$12,000.00 more compared to American Indian and Alaska Natives, as well as Hispanic and Latino individuals (O’Connor Carolyn, 2013). Woodburn and Salem are estimated to have the highest rates for low income households, while having the highest percentage of ethnic diversity when compared to other cities in Oregon (O’Connor Carolyn, 2013). According to 2012 study, titled “Home environment relationships with children's physical activity, sedentary time, and screen time by socioeconomic status” by Pooja S, Tandon et al., children from lower socio-economic households had a greater media access to TV, DVD players, and video games at home, while lower access to outdoor equipment such as bikes and jump ropes (Pooja S. Tandon et al, 2012). This **economic injustice** or income inequality that is reflected in parental employment opportunities due to race, and food insecurity in the household can negatively reduce the accessibility for Hispanic and Latino youth to interact with the outdoors. A 2016 study, titled “Places where preschoolers are (in)active: an observational study on Latino preschoolers and their parents using objective measures”, found that children were 30 percent

more active in a park or playground setting, in contrast to only 8 percent active in a childcare or school setting (Cerin Ester et al, 2016). Differences between neighborhood security, location of the home and its proximity to local parks and playgrounds between Hispanic and Latino communities with white, non-Hispanic or Latino communities, makes evident how **environmental privilege** can impact youth's interaction with nature, and their leisure time for physical activity, due to limited outdoor access.

In addition to the parental gatekeeping role, and dynamic home environment, there are outside environmental factors that can influence the Hispanic and Latino youth interaction with the outdoors; such as the media. TV advertisement, local news and radio stations, each contain their own **agenda setting**⁵; the media's ability to affect the public's perception regarding the urgency of a particular issue when choosing to focus on a certain topic. As pezullo states in her Environmental communication and the public sphere book, "Media is successful in telling people what to think about and not about what to think" (Pezzullo, Phaedra C et al, 2018). Pezullo constructs communication and behavior as a form of **symbolic action**⁶, that helps each person make sense of their own relationships with the environment, establish values and formulate actions. The significance of local radio stations communication style, narrative construction and framework can either shape or reinforce existing attitudes and behaviors towards the outdoors, and nature within the Hispanic and Latino community. Further research must be completed to uncover the number of radio stations that provide air coverage in Spanish, to target and engage non-English speakers in the Salem community. As well, understand the amount of air coverage each radio station dedicates to advertise local outdoor activities in the community, summer camps, to emphasize youth health.

Oregon is home to the Hispanic and Latino population, and thus, this community needs to be represented in dominant public health discourses involving environmental justice, and recreational outdoor programs, to improve lifestyle habits, physical activity and reduce youth susceptibility to childhood obesity. Increasing outdoor recreational programs available to

⁵Agenda Setting refers to the media's capability to influence the public's perception and the relevance of an issue, by deciding what topics and stories will be covered and portrayed to be important (Pezullo, 2018).

⁶Symbolic Action is the usage of communication and behavior as a form of symbolic action. Where communication style can cause an action, and help people make sense of their own relationships with nature and values (Pezullo, 2018).

Hispanic and Latino youth and family members, can help increase both their local environmental awareness, science literacy and above all, the importance to stay physically active. Out of all recreational outdoor programs offered in Salem Oregon, few are family based, let alone, committed to serving the Hispanic and Latino youth community. Parental actions, feeding patterns, and the economic and environmental state of the home environment will reflect on the children's overall health. As the Hispanic and Latino community progressively expand in Oregon, and their children are the most susceptible to childhood obesity, further steps need to be taken to improve their representation in white spaces, such as outdoor recreational programs.

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