

Contextual pathways to Latino child welfare involvement: A theoretical model located in the intersections of place, culture, and socio-structural factors

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ABSTRACT

Latino children and families represent the fastest growing group in the child welfare system. However, research that explores Latinos experiences in the child welfare system is limited. By drawing upon several bodies of literature, this paper introduces a Latino Child Welfare Research and Practice Model that incorporates the physical, individual and social, institutional, socio-political, and subjective environments. The theoretical model posits that the lack of attention to these multiple and interlocking contextual dimensions of environment increases risk for Latino children to enter the child welfare system. Taken together, the five dimensions of environment incorporate contextual pathways to Latino child welfare that are historically situated in time and place, rooted in culture, and ideologically driven by socio-structural institutions. The model is used as a guiding framework to inform effective Latino child welfare practice, research, and policy recommendations.

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1. Introduction

Numerous scholars (e.g., see Kessler et al., 2008; Waldfogel, 1998; Wulczyn et al., 2005) posit that the child welfare system is in need of massive system reform since the basic needs of at risk youth and families continue to go unmet. Latino children and families represent the fastest growing group in the child welfare system (Rivera, 2002). However, research and practice lack explanatory frameworks that incorporate contextual pathways to entering and remaining in the child welfare system for this population.

In light of this shortcoming, this paper offers a Latino Child Welfare Research and Practice Model (See Fig. 1) to guide child welfare practitioners and researchers in thinking about and gaining a more nuanced understanding of the historical and contemporary contextual factors that may lead to Child Protective Service (CPS) intervention. The paper argues that the continuing lack of attention to the physical, social–interactional, institutional, socio-political, and subjective dimensions of environment in child welfare research and practice will increase the numbers of Latinos who come to the attention of the child welfare system.

Before defining the interlocking contextual dimensions of the theoretical model, this paper offers a brief overview of some

challenges facing Latino communities and the inequitable outcomes Latino children and families encounter in the child welfare system. Next, the paper explains the dimensions of the model within the context of the culturally specific epistemologies Latinos live by and honor, the conditions under which place holds meaning and value for them, and the institutions and policies that govern, shape, reinforce, and/or restrict life opportunities. Using the model as a guide, the last section offers suggestions for conducting effective child welfare research, policy, and practice for Latino children and families.

2. Background information

The growing numbers of Latinos in the U.S is evident. Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population increased by almost 13 million (US Census Bureau, 2000). With a population of over 44 million persons as of 2006, Latinos now represent almost 15% of the population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). By the year 2030, it is projected that the Latino population will increase to 73 million and constitute 20.1% of the U.S. population, making them the fastest-growing group in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, as cited in IHH, 2005, p. 4). Meanwhile, in 2006, one in five children under age 18 in the United States were Latino (Kids Count, 2008). During that time period, Latino children accounted for 20% of the child population, and this figure is expected to increase to 24% by 2020.

Despite the increasing numbers of Latinos, little attention has been devoted to addressing the challenges affecting quality of life (IHH,

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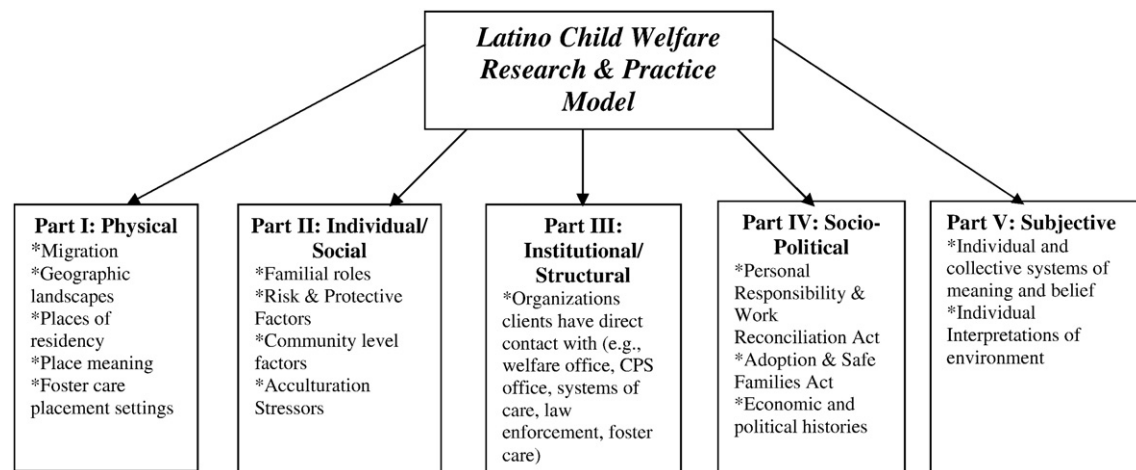


Fig. 1. Integrative theoretical model.

2005). For example, Latinos are disproportionately represented among low-income families. Sixty-two percent of Latino children under the age of 18 reside in low-income families compared to only 26% of Caucasian children (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2005, as cited in Prelow, Loukas, & Jordan-Green, 2007). Moreover, over 25% of young children in Latino immigrant families are poor, compared with 20% in native-born Latino families (Capps et al., 2004). Consequently, Capps et al. (2004) report that children in Latino immigrant families are considerably more likely to be uninsured, to be reported in fair or poor health, and to lack regular and preventive health care.

3. Latinos experiences in the child welfare system

In light of the disproportionate exposure to poverty and lack of insurance to obtain supports and resources for medical and counseling services, it is essential to unpack how these hardships produce cumulative risk for Latinos to enter the child welfare system. Once stressors elevate to a point when CPS is involved, Latino children often remain in the child welfare system for a longer duration than their Caucasian counterparts (Church, 2006).

3.1. Epidemiology of abuse and neglect among Latino children

According to recent statistics, the numbers of Latinos in the child welfare system are increasing as the population continues to grow. As of September 2006, 19% (96,967) of the children in foster care were Hispanic, which is similar to the percent of children in the United States who are Hispanic (20%) (USDHHS, 2008). This is a remarkable difference from when Latinos used to only account for 8% in 1990 and 15% of the children in foster care in 2001 (USDHHS, 2001b; as cited in CHCF, 2004).

In a similar fashion, the rates of victimization increased steadily over the past ten years. In 1996, the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse reported that approximately 10% of all abused children were Latino (Ortega, Guilleán, & Gutierrez-Najera, 1996). Ten years later in 2006, 18.4% of all victims of maltreatment in the U.S. were Latino (USDHHS, 2008). About 55% of these victims were neglected, 9.6% were physically abused, 0.9% were medically neglected, and 6.2% were sexually abused. Over 14% were referred to CPS due to psychological, other or unknown maltreatment, 14.3% reportedly suffered from multiple maltreatments, and nearly one-fifth (17.0%, $n = 187$) of child fatalities were of "Hispanic" origin. Overall, the odds of victimization were higher for Hispanic children than their Caucasian counterparts (OR 1.06) in 2006 (USDHHS, 2008).

Moreover, when compared to African American and Caucasian children, Latino youth are the most likely group to be victims of

physical abuse (NSCAW, 2003). Ards et al. (2003) report that substantiation rates among Latinos are higher in geographical areas where the community is heavily represented. However, there are other potential confounding factors that may contribute to the disproportionate "substantiation" of maltreatment among Latinos (e.g. cultural differences in parental discipline, influence of acculturation on parenting, racial bias). Fontes (2002), for example, reports Latino parents have higher probabilities of being reported to CPS because parents respond immediately to discipline children, regardless of whether or not they are in a public area.

Over the past few years, scholars have attempted to unravel how Latino children fare if they are placed in foster care. A growing body of research suggests Latino children are younger than their White counterparts when placed in out of home care. These findings are substantiated in both nationally (e.g., see Alzate & Rosenthal, 2008) and locally (e.g., see Kemp and Bodonyi, 2000, 2002; Church, 2006) represented samples throughout the United States. Some studies show strong evidence that Latinos are younger even at the referral stage, and spend a significant more time in state custody than do non-Latino Whites (e.g. see Church, 2006). Moreover, Barth (1996) concludes Latino youth are less likely to be adopted than their Caucasian counterparts.

Due to these negative outcomes, data show that Latinos are overrepresented in the child welfare system (i.e., have disproportionality rates that exceed 1.00) in ten states (Hill, 2005). There needs to be further research to pinpoint exactly at what stage Latinos are overrepresented in the child welfare system (i.e., by reporting, substantiation, foster care entry, reunification, and reentry) by state, region, county, and neighborhood. Such valuable data would provide researchers and policy makers information about where to target culturally appropriate interventions.

While historically research examined Latinos as a community of individuals who share similar experiences and outcomes in the child welfare system, scholars have recently disaggregated analyses between native and foreign-born children and families. In a groundbreaking study, Vericker, Kuehn, and Capps (2007) concluded that native-born (third generation) Latino children are overrepresented in the Texas child welfare system while Latino immigrant children (first generation) and children of immigrants (second generation) are underrepresented. In fact, while approximately 33% of the children in care in Texas were Latino natives, they only represented 22% of all children in Texas. More research is needed to determine if results can be substantiated nationally and in other geographic regions. This remains a challenge, given that there are no reliable data about the number of immigrant children and families in the child welfare system.

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