

Maternal and paternal similarities and differences in parenting: An examination of Mexican-American parents of young children

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Abstract

The present study evaluated the degree of parental similarity–dissimilarity across parenting dimensions operationalized in terms of: (1) one's own and one's partner's style; (2) meta-emotion belief structures; (3) behavioral strategies in reaction to children's emotions; as well as (4) parental support and responsiveness. The first four dimensions were assessed with independent self-reports from both mothers and fathers and the latter was measured through observed behaviors in a discussion of emotions. Fifty-seven families participated. The mothers (92%) and fathers (90%) of preschool-aged children (mean age 57.5 months, 54% male) were predominantly of Mexican descent. Results revealed significant similarity when comparing mothers' and fathers' observed behaviors. Agreement among parents also emerged when comparing minimizing coping reactions to children's emotional displays and self-reported and reports of one's partner's authoritative parenting. Despite evidence of agreement on use of authoritative strategies and similarity on observed behaviors, comparisons of mean levels revealed dissimilarity. The participating mothers reported a greater tendency to employ authoritative strategies and their partners' ratings of the mothers' parenting confirmed this perceived difference. In addition, comparisons of mothers' and fathers' observed behaviors in interaction with their children suggested that, while mothers and fathers are engaged in similar behaviors, mothers are observed to engage in them more frequently. These results reinforce the need to assess both parents, employing multiple methods, in determining interdependence or their combined and unique contributions to socializing children.

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Parenting is conceptualized and assessed in diverse ways in the developmental literature. For example, some researchers have focused on parenting styles (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005), or patterns of caregiving composed of different combinations of warm–responsive/harsh–unresponsive and demanding/underdemanding behaviors. Other researchers have conceptualized parenting in terms of cognitive processes, such as attitudes toward childrearing (Holden & Edwards, 1989), beliefs (Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Sigel, McGillicuddy-De Lisi, & Goodnow, 1992), and goals (Dix, 1992, 1993; Hastings & Coplan, 1999; Hastings & Grusec, 1998). Still other researchers have explored specific parenting behaviors in different contexts, where measurements of behaviors may be either observational (Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004), or consist of self-reported practices within a particular domain of child rearing (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006).

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Regardless of how parenting is conceptualized or assessed, investigations of associations among various dimensions of parenting and children's developmental outcomes have been dominated by a focus on mothers' parenting styles, beliefs, or behaviors. A number of investigators are increasingly emphasizing that we know considerably less about fathers' parenting, either its nature or impact (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). Of the voices being raised, some propose that when fathers are included in research, it is not sufficient to simply examine the direct or indirect influence of their parenting on children as compared to mothers. Instead, as a family systems perspective suggests (Minuchin, 1985), elements in the system are presumed to be interdependent. Mothers' and fathers' parenting styles, practices, and beliefs are capable of influencing and being influenced by the other partner. Each partner's expectations, beliefs, and parenting behaviors will have ramifications for the spousal relationship, co-parenting, and parent-child subsystems. Further, the relationship between mothers' and fathers' agreement or disagreement across different dimensions of parenting makes an important contribution to children's functioning, accounting for unique variance beyond either of the individual contributions (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Deal, Halverson, & Wampler, 1989; Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994). Where there is more agreement or similarity, the expectation is greater homeostasis within the system with implications for promoting well-being among its members (Deal et al., 1989).

As such, assessing the pattern of scores across the parenting dyad and determining the similarity or dissimilarity makes conceptual sense. This strategy results in data that more accurately reflect family dynamics and the child's simultaneous exposure to both parents' attitudes and behaviors and captures transactions within and across family subsystems. This position makes methodological sense as well. Parenting measures have been known to suffer from biases in recall, reflect social desirability in response sets, and to measure idealized rather than actual beliefs or behaviors (Holden & Miller, 1999). Collecting information from both parents simultaneously allows the investigator to reduce the risk of reporter bias (Nix et al., 1999).

The present study seeks to evaluate the nature and degree of parental agreement across parenting dimensions operationalized in terms of: (1) self-reported styles in the Baumrind (1978, 1989) tradition; (2) meta-emotion belief structures (or characteristic feelings and thoughts related to a child's emotional displays); (3) parents' self-reported behavioral strategies for coping with or reacting to children's emotions; as well as (4) parental support and responsiveness as measured through observed behaviors in a discussion of emotions. Both mothers and fathers independently reported their styles, beliefs, and coping behaviors. In the case of general styles, data were collected on each parent's view of his/her partner's parenting style as well.

The present study asked the question of whether levels of agreement-disagreement between parents may vary depending on the dimension of parenting being assessed. In previous studies, little to moderate agreement has been observed on broadly defined global parenting styles (Winsler, Madigan, & Aquilino, 2005). It is possible, however, that parents could demonstrate more agreement on how to respond within a specific domain of socializing their child. Agreement across more concrete behaviors is expected because parents may discuss or model one another's strategies. Alternatively, similarity could be a function of the child's own characteristics which are eliciting similar responses from both parents (Harris, 1995; Hastings & Rubin, 1999).

One goal of the present study was to replicate findings for comparative reports of parenting styles (Winsler et al., 2005) with a sample that includes parents who are of predominantly Mexican descent. Mexican-Americans represent the largest Latino group in the United States and this population is steadily growing, yet not much is known about parenting practices in this population (Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003). If exploring parenting practices among ethnic parents, developmental scientists note the importance of accounting for differences in socializing goals or values of those parents in contrast to those in the majority population (García Coll et al., 1996). Values sometimes identified with Latino populations include marianismo, machismo, familismo, and personalismo (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002); values that lead to distinct predictions regarding comparisons of mothers' and fathers' parenting. Families of Latino descent in the United States are described as subscribing to values upholding functional dominance of males (machismo) complemented by traditional caregiving roles for women (marianismo), or the reinforcement of sex role distinctions in child rearing practices (De Von Figueroa-Moseley, Ramey, Keltner, & Lanzi, 2006). To the extent that these values are influencing socialization of children, these distinct roles would be expected to translate into dissimilarity between parents' styles, beliefs, behaviors, and little paternal involvement in child care. However, the Mexican culture is also characterized as collectivist (Ramírez, 1990), where Mexicans and Mexican-Americans ascribe to values promoting family unity (familismo), solidarity, and getting along with others (personalismo). These latter two family cultural values lay the foundation for parental agreement and similarity. While the present study does not

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