



Ethnic group differences in early head start parents' parenting beliefs and practices and links to children's early cognitive development

Micere Keels

Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, 5730 S. Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637, United States

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ABSTRACT

Data from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation study were used to examine the extent to which several factors mediate between- and within-ethnic-group differences in parenting beliefs and behaviors, and children's early cognitive development (analysis sample of 1198 families). The findings indicate that Hispanic-, European-, and African-Americans differ significantly in their parenting beliefs and behaviors. Children also evidence significant ethnic group differences in 24-month cognitive development; these differences were fully accounted for by controlling for maternal cognitive skills, as measured by lexical knowledge. In comparison, maternal parenting behaviors were only a partial mediator of ethnic group differences in children's cognitive development. Structural equation modeling was used to examine, within each ethnic group, the extent to which measured parenting beliefs and behaviors mediate the effect of maternal cognitive skills on children's early cognitive development. Analyses show that the mediated path from maternal cognitive skills to child cognitive development, via "mainstream" parenting beliefs and behaviors, was stronger for European-American families than for Hispanic- and African-American families. The policy implications of increasing the schooling-related cognitive skills of low-educated parents are discussed.

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There is well-documented and consistent evidence of socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnic group disparities in children's early developmental outcomes, most favoring children from middle-income, native-born, European-American families (Magnuson, Lahaie, & Waldfogel, 2006; Zill, Collins, West, & Hausken, 1995). By kindergarten entry, these immigrant, ethnic, and SES group differences in the cognitive skills that are predictive of school success are clearly evident; therefore, prevention requires the examination of these issues early in children's developmental histories (Duncan et al., 2007; La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2008). Although immigrant, ethnic minority, and low SES children are over-represented in the numbers of children judged to be not ready for kindergarten, substantial numbers of these children arrive at kindergarten "ready to learn" (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Wertheimer, Croan, Moore, & Hair, 2003). This heterogeneity in the development of at-risk children needs to be explored to identify avenues for intervention that are aligned with the sociocultural environments that immigrant, minority, and low-income families must navigate (Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005).

Children with at least one foreign-born parent are the fastest growing group of children in the U.S. (approximately one in four U.S. children resides in an immigrant family); approximately 60% of whom have parents born in Mexico or other Latin American countries (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). Hispanic-American immigrant children are exposed to a mix of familial risk factors (lower levels of parent schooling, English proficiency, economic resources, and health insurance), and protective factors (two adults in the home, cared for by a parent, larger familial support network, and less likely to

E-mail address: Micere@uchicago.edu.

Combined Direct and Mediated Model

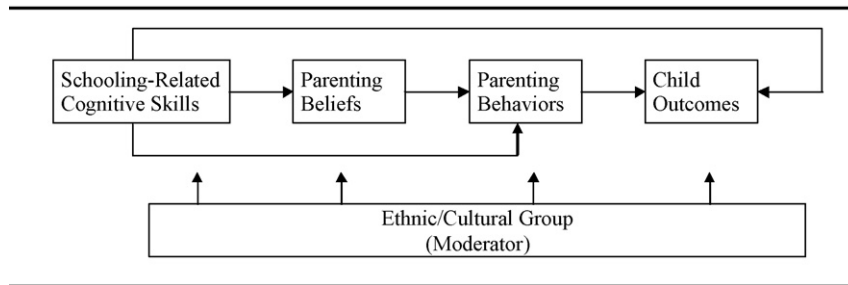


Fig. 1. Combined direct and mediated model.

have teen mothers) (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2008). It is therefore difficult to predict the extent to which the European- and Hispanic-American gaps in cognitive development that are evident later in childhood will be evident early in children's developmental histories (24 months of age). There is also limited evidence regarding whether, among Hispanic-American families, the within-ethnic-group heterogeneity associated with nativity and acculturation evident among elementary and older children will be observed among toddlers (Leventhal, Brooks-Gunn, & Xue, 2006). To present a detailed picture of these issues among low-income families, I examine both the between- and within-ethnic-group variation in early cognitive outcomes and several family background and cultural factors that could potentially mediate any observed group differences.

This paper focuses on ethnic group differences in the early precursors of kindergarten entry cognitive skills, and therefore necessitates exploring the mediating role of parenting. Raviv, Kessenich, and Morrison (2004) found that maternal sensitivity and cognitive stimulation were significant partial mediators of the relationship between SES and three-year-old children's receptive and expressive language skills. Lugo-Gil and Tamis-LeMonda (2008), using the same dataset that is used in this paper, found that among a sample of demographically disadvantaged families, the effects of family economic resources on children's cognitive outcomes at 14, 24, and 36 months were completely mediated by parenting quality—but what of ethnic group differences in children's early cognitive development, does parenting play a similarly large mediational role? It is particularly important to understand these issues during the years before school entry when parenting cultural knowledge, through its shaping of the character of children's developmental experiences, can affect the size of the ethnic group gaps in cognitive skills that are evident at kindergarten entry. It is important to note that there are no culturally neutral, right or wrong developmental environments, just those that more or less prepare children for functioning in particular contexts. European-American middle-income culture, which is the culture on which U.S. schools are based, prioritizes active parent involvement, scaffolding, and teaching in an environment that promotes early emotional independence (Brice Heath, 1983; Greenfield et al., 2006; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Children in families that do not subscribe to these cultural beliefs and practices may appear to be developmentally delayed based on teachers' expectations of children's kindergarten entry competencies.

Many researchers believe that ethnic and SES differences in parenting (e.g., nurturance, discipline, learning opportunities, and language use) may account for as much as one-half of the European-American minority gap in school readiness (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997; Pianta, Smith, & Reeve, 1991). These studies often silently implicate cultural differences, born out of adapting to socioeconomic and neighborhood constraints, ethnic heritage, and/or racial discrimination, as the causal factors affecting both parenting behaviors and child outcomes. However, these studies only measured parenting behaviors and did not include measures of parenting cultural knowledge, and often confounded ethnicity with SES (income and education). In this study, I attempt to address these issues by: (1) constraining the potential effects of income by using a dataset of EHS-eligible families, (2) including a measure of maternal cognitive skills, (3) measures of parenting cultural knowledge, (4) and measures of parenting behaviors. For Hispanic-American families, I also consider the effects of acculturation because previous research has associated increases in acculturation with a higher likelihood of mainstream U.S. parenting practices (Cardona, Nicholson, & Fox, 2000; García Coll & Pachter, 2002).

The research presented in this paper utilizes a combined direct and mediated model (Fig. 1), in which parent schooling-related cognitive skills, parenting beliefs, and parenting behaviors are three increasingly proximal variables that potentially affect children's early cognitive skills. I hypothesize that between-ethnic-group differences in maternal cognitive skills and parenting beliefs will account for a substantial proportion of the between-ethnic-group differences in parenting behaviors, and that between-ethnic-group differences in maternal cognitive skills and parenting behaviors will account for a substantial amount of the between-ethnic-group differences in children's early cognitive development. Finally, because the parenting beliefs and behaviors measured in this study are based on European-American middle-class cultural orientations, I believe that these factors will be more useful for explaining within-ethnic-group differences for European- than for Hispanic- or African-American children. This research takes an exploration of differences, not deficits, approach by examining both between- and within-ethnic-group differences in the parenting beliefs and behaviors mediating the path from maternal cognitive skills to child cognitive development (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Suizzo et al., 2008). Sugland et al. (1995) clearly articulated three key reasons for examining how parenting measures function in different ethnic groups. One,

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