



Complex inequality: A contextual parenting framework for Latino infants



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 January 2014
 Received in revised form 27 June 2014
 Accepted 30 June 2014
 Available online 8 July 2014

Keywords:

Parenting
 Latino families
 Infants
 Child welfare
 Culture
 Environment

ABSTRACT

Latino infants and toddlers are rapidly becoming the most represented ethnic group within the overall U.S. child population, underscoring the importance of a comprehensive conceptual framework informed by the factors that affect their well-being, including their lived environments. Research that explores parenting among Latino families is limited or tends to portray a homogenized Latino experience, without accounting for within-group differences. This paper presents a contextual parenting framework for Latino infants that incorporates a more nuanced understanding of culture as well as its complex and reciprocal relationship with environment. It highlights the multi-level, multisystemic, contexts affecting these families on the present day. This framework hypothesizes that cultural beliefs around family and child rearing, as well as the environment – constituted of physical environment and social opportunities – influence parenting. Further, institutional and structural inequalities can significantly affect the environmental conditions that Latino families experience and are therefore examined in the model. The way parenting behaviors are understood and interpreted by researchers and practitioners has serious consequences for parents engaged in the child welfare system. This paper explores how vulnerable Latino families with young children engaged in this complicated system experience the factors described by the parenting framework.

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1. Introduction

Parenting is a task that every group of people in the world engages in to promote the growth and development of their children into adults who are able to function in their environments. Parenting behaviors are seen as developmentally specific and critically important. Large gaps exist in the research on how, as academics and practitioners, we understand, capture, and translate the diverse cultural beliefs and the real life environmental experiences of Latinos, whose children now comprise 32% of U.S. residents 5 years and younger (Fry & Passel, 2009). Since parenting is the key interest in infant and early childhood mental health, social welfare researchers and practitioners must better understand the effects that culture and environment have on parenting practices of this population.

1.1. Background

Early childhood is characterized by dependence on caregivers for food, shelter, and nurturance (Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003). Young children rely on the adults in their environments to shield them from adverse circumstances or negative environmental exposures. Through the parent–child relationship, the parent buffers the child and provides a framework for the child to interpret and

experience external pressures (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). This relationship becomes a central risk or protective factor, depending on the strength and quality of the bond. The quality of this relationship is multidimensional, affected by caregiver factors (e.g., parent mental health, level of parenting skill) and child factors (e.g., temperament; Halfon, Larson, & Russ, 2010; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Because of their developmental vulnerability and dependency on caregivers, social disparities are more likely to have an effect on young children, which leads to increased risk across a spectrum of health indicators including social, emotional, medical, and dental health (Halfon et al., 2010).

Significant evidence exists supporting the alarming extent to which, broadly, Latino children are confronted with social disparities as they grow and develop, including high rates of poverty (Lopez & Velasco, 2011), poor access to medical care (Flores & Tomany-Korman, 2008), disparate health outcomes (Vega, Rodriguez, & Gruskin, 2009), and significant educational disparities (Fuller & Kim, 2011b). However, a large portion of what we know about these disparities is based on research lacking in information about within-group differences. These disparities may be compounded by a variety of other factors such as level of English language proficiency, documentation status, and geographic location. While young Latino children are largely U.S.-born, a little under half have at least one parent who is foreign born, many of whom are likely undocumented (Fry & Passel, 2009). Formal and informal support systems available initially for immigrating families can be further influenced by whether families migrate to geographic locations that have established ethnic enclaves (such as California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas) compared to states with less developed

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supportive infrastructure (such as Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and North Carolina; Massey & Capoferro, 2008).

Population projections show continuing increases of young Latino children in particular over the next decade (Child Trends, 2012). Over the past 20 years, the percentage of Latino children under the age of 18 years in the U.S. has grown from 9% to 23% (Child Trends, 2012). Latinos now account for 80% of the U.S. population gain of children from birth to 19 years old, with the largest concentration of growth between birth and 5 years old (Fry & Passel, 2009; Johnson & Lichter, 2010). Despite current and projected demographic trends regarding the growth in Latino families with young children and documented exposure to significant social and health disparities, little is known about parenting support needs for these families.

Culturally informed, theoretically driven frameworks for supporting parenting in Latino communities are insufficiently represented in the parenting literature. To effectively support and engage these families it is necessary to have a complex understanding of the unique factors influencing nurturing parenting to inform intervention and prevention efforts in culturally responsive ways. For families with young children, this framework must be presented within a developmental and cultural context due to distinct parenting needs that exist for young children at different developmental stages (Combs-Orme et al., 2003). Latinos in the U.S. encounter multilevel factors, from the impact of their physical environments on family functioning and well-being, to the resources they have at their disposal. A culturally and contextually sensitive parenting framework must be responsive to traditional cultural beliefs and acculturative effects, as well as availability and accessibility of support systems and resources.

1.2. Purpose: Latino parenting framework

The concept of parenting is culturally constructed and environmentally influenced. Drawing on literature from multiple disciplines, I present herein a framework for understanding the contextual factors for consideration when working with Latino families with young children. Within this framework, I hypothesize that the environment, consisting of both physical environment (e.g., neighborhood, community) and social opportunities that are available within that environment (e.g., employment, availability and accessibility of support resources), influences parenting strategies/behaviors. Institutional and structural inequalities often determine the conditions under which Latino families come to be in the U.S. and what environmental settings they experience. Furthermore, cultural beliefs around family and child-rearing values influence parenting decisions. I first examine the relationship between culture, environment, and parenting using an environmental risk framework. Domains of cultural variation within the Latino community are then examined, followed by an overview of the social and environmental challenges that Latino families face in the U.S. Using this framework, I then evaluate how these factors may be experienced by a particularly vulnerable group of Latino parents — those at risk for involvement with or already engaged in the child welfare system. For this group of parents, how their parenting behaviors are interpreted and evaluated by practitioners in the system has serious consequences. These parents' actions are often under a microscope, leading sometimes to temporary removal of children from their homes or termination of parental rights altogether.

My intention herein is to illustrate the rich heterogeneity of the Latino community, highlighting the importance of a nuanced approach with these families because of their vast cultural and contextual diversity. A better understanding of the cultural and environmental experiences and histories and the unique parenting needs from an emic perspective has great value as researchers seek effective parenting and mental health interventions with this population. An emic focus positions research and theory-building as emerging from the population of interest instead of from an etic focus, the more traditional, researcher-driven approach, that positions research through their own

theoretical framework and worldview (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010; Zayas & Rojas-Flores, 2002). Viewing Latino families in this manner further helps to shape efforts in the meaningful conceptualization and sustainable implementation of interventions with implications for improving Latino child mental health outcomes and narrowing the health disparity gap for this population.

2. Culture, environment, and parenting – reciprocal processes

Parenting practices are widely recognized as being culturally constructed. Parents adapt their practices to take account of their environmental circumstances. Child rearing, and the beliefs that guide parents, differ from culture to culture, and cultures vary in what child attributes they value and subsequently elicit, reward, and encourage. For example, research finds that among families of Mexican and Dominican origin, values of respect and obedience are more likely to be encouraged over Western values of assertiveness and autonomy (Calzada et al., 2010). Given the variation in parenting behaviors across and within cultural groups, a spectrum of parenting and family interactions seems probable. Thus, a framework for parenting beliefs and practices needs flexibility to account for the influence of family history, culture, and environmental context.

The framework presented in this paper draws from an ecological environmental risk framework originally proposed by Quinlan and Quinlan (2007), who used a life-history approach to understand how environmental risk over time transforms a family's cultural beliefs. These authors suggest that when parents perceive environmental risk, regardless of their prior beliefs, they will alter their parenting approach to place their children on a trajectory to gain tools that support survival. Cultural values and parenting strategies that do not support survival might be altered, whereas values and behaviors that remain protective within the presence of environmental risk would be sustained.

The acculturative process significantly influences parenting strategies/behaviors and the capacity for the framework proposed here to capture shifting parenting strategies and cultural values as a function of environmental risk is particularly relevant for Latino families in the U.S. since many of them face challenging circumstances and environmental conditions. Because Latino immigrants range broadly in level of acculturation, parents often present a spectrum of parenting strategies and the diverse cultural values supporting them. This framework suggests that these variations reflect the complex and reciprocal relationship between parenting, environment, and culture, with variables within each category requiring attention.

An example of the ecological environmental risk framework can be seen in Reese's (2002) study of parenting beliefs and values for Mexican immigrants raising children in the U.S. In a longitudinal study exploring literacy development in children between 1989 and 1998, the study compared Mexican immigrant families with those of their siblings who were raising children in Mexico. Through ethnographic inquiry, shared parenting values were identified between the two groups such as *respeto* (obedience to and respect for parents and elders), *familismo* (family unity), and *buenos modeles* (referring to fundamentally, morally driven "correct" behavior). Parents emphasized that they felt it was their role to teach their children *el buen camino* (the good path) so children could be raised with a solid understanding of right and wrong (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995).¹

Reese (2002) found that the families raising children in the U.S. predominantly lived in working-class neighborhoods. These parents described their neighborhoods as dangerous, with high levels of gang activity. They reported that they worked hard to keep their children away from bad peers and other influences that undermined their family

¹ While these cultural values may be seen as important within other groups in the U.S., smaller qualitative studies examining specific Latino groups have suggested that Latino parents rank *respeto* and *familismo* more highly than other groups do (e.g., Calzada et al., 2010; Gonzalez-Ramos et al., 1998).

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