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Excavating Culture: Summary of Results

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This is a companion paper to the seven articles also published in this special issue of Applied Developmental Science. This paper summarizes and discusses the results from common analyses that were conducted on different datasets. The common analyses were designed to disentangle contextual and ethnic influences on parenting. Initial ethnic group differences were found in many of the datasets with multiple ethnic groups. Although certain ethnic group differences were explained by contextual influences, some ethnic group differences remained after contextual influences were controlled. Follow-up analyses with datasets containing cultural variables revealed within group differences in the degree to which ethnic differences in parenting may be accounted for by contextual factors versus culturally-specific processes. Methodological and theoretical implications are discussed and future directions are offered.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

In summarizing findings from the preceding six studies, we organized this section around four major issues. First, we highlight ethnic differences that remained in our models after controlling for the influence of contextual variables. Second, we note ethnic differences that were related in predictive ways to one or more of the cultural variables, and highlight the ethnic differences that remain when contextual variables were controlled but were not related to cultural variables. Third, we highlight the ethnic differences that were explained by...
contextual factors as they shed light on “(mis)assumptions” about ethnic or cultural differences. Finally, we discuss contextual factors and culturally specific processes that were related to parenting in within group comparisons.

Parental Warmth

Both African Americans and Asian Americans scored lower on parental warmth than did European American parents (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008). Ethnic differences in warmth differed as a function of the developmental ages of the children. For example, our findings revealed that at younger ages (4th grade–Hill and 3rd grade–Pinderhughes), ethnic group differences remained after controlling for contextual variables. Specifically, African American parents displayed more warmth than did European American parents (Pinderhughes et al., 2008). Among older youth (9th–12th grades), however, variations in warmth observed between African American and European American parents were explained by socioeconomic variables, neighborhood quality, and number of children in the home (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008; Pinderhughes et al. 2008). Cultural factors emerged as significant predictors of parental warmth for Latinos and Asian Americans, including children’s native language fluency and values of interdependence (both were positively related to warmth).

Findings from within group comparisons revealed that for African Americans, elevated ethnic pride (Hill & Tyson, 2008) and religiosity were significant predictors of parents’ reports of warmth (Murry et al., 2008). Further, home ownership and living in a resourceful/cohesive neighborhood, or one that is unsafe, were associated with greater use of warmth among African American parents (Murry et al., 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2008). Hill and Pinderhughes also noted the role of neighborhood quality in predicting warmth among African Americans. In their studies, residing in more advantaged communities fostered increases in the use of warmth toward children. In addition, socioeconomic status emerged as an important predictor of displays of parental warmth among African Americans. Noteworthy is that those of low-income status reported higher displays of warmth toward their children than their counterparts of higher SES (Pinderhughes et al., 2008). Also, having a large number of children and exposure to negative life events, including racial discrimination, were associated with reduced parental expressions of warmth and support toward their children (Murry et al., 2008).

Several within-group differences also emerged for Asian Americans. Accordingly, Chao found that Koreans and South Asians had higher ratings on parental warmth than did Chinese. In addition, socioeconomic status and cultural factors were also related to parenting, specifically fathers’ education, as well as children’s fluency in the native language and endorsement in cultural values of both independence and interdependence. These factors were positively related to the parental warmth of Asian Americans. Similarly, children’s degree of fluency in the native language and endorsement of cultural values of interdependence, as well as having smaller families, were related to increases in parental warmth among Latinos (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008).

Psychological Control

Of the datasets included in this collection of papers, only two studies were able to examine ethnic differences in psychological control (Ceballo & Hurd, 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2008). Although the study comparing Latina and European American mothers (Ceballo & Hurd, 2008) found no ethnic differences in psychological control, the other study comparing African Americans and European Americans did find differences based on children’s reports, but not based on mothers’ reports (Hill & Tyson, 2008). With this latter study, African American children reported higher levels of psychological control for their mothers than did European American children. These ethnic differences remained even after accounting for the contextual factors involving neighborhood, socioeconomic, and family risk and stress. Furthermore, although African American children reported higher levels of psychological control for their mothers, European American mothers (Ceballo & Hurd, 2008) found no ethnic differences in psychological control, the within-group analyses examining cultural factors suggested that beliefs in ethnic equity were a buffer against the use of such control strategies. On the other hand, although no ethnic group differences were found between Latinas and European Americans in mothers’ psychological control, one contextual factor—neighborhood quality—was related to higher levels of psychological control for the sample overall (Ceballo & Hurd, 2008). Additionally, in examinations with the Latinas, acculturation was a buffer against the use of this control. Thus, in both studies by Ceballo and Hill, cultural variables were significant in explaining variation in mothers’ psychological control among Latinos and African Americans, and in the latter study, may explain the African American and European American differences that were found.

Behavioral Control

There is much less consistency across datasets for parental reports of the use of behavioral control. Two of the four cross-ethnic analyses examining ethnic differences in the use of behavioral control revealed that variations between African Americans and European Americans remained even after controlling for the influence of contextual variables among families of eighth grade and high school students (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2008). Although ethnicity did not emerge as a significant predictor of mothers’
use of behavioral control with kindergartners, differences between African American and European American parents’ use of behavioral control did emerge for mothers of fourth graders. Accordingly, these differences were explained by socioeconomic status (Hill & Tyson, 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2008), Pinderhughes et al., 2008), depression (Pinderhughes et al., 2008), and locale of residence (Pinderhughes et al., 2008). Moreover, ethnic differences were also found between European Americans and Asians Americans, with the latter higher than the former (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008). The contextual factors only partially explained the Asian American and European American differences, in that marginally significant differences remained after controlling for SES.

Chao also found ethnic differences between Latinos and European Americans after controlling for the contribution of contextual factors. An examination of these findings revealed that both mothers’ education and single-parent status were negatively related to behavioral control. Results from within-group analyses from Chao’s study revealed that Mexican American youth reported significantly lower levels of exposure to behavioral control compared to Central American youth. Additionally, Chao found that the longer the mothers had been in the United States, the more they relied on behavioral control. These subethnic and immigration-related factors remained significant, even after accounting for the contextual variables of SES, and none of the contextual factors were related to the behavioral control of Latino parents. Similarly, in examinations among the Asian Americans (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008), subethnic differences found (between Koreans and Chinese) remained even after accounting for the contextual factors. Also, just as with the Latinos, none of the contextual factors were related to the behavioral control of Asian immigrant parents. In contrast, Pinderhughes’ data revealed that cultural factors were unrelated to behavioral control.

Monitoring

Some inconsistencies emerged across datasets regarding ethnic differences in parental monitoring. In one dataset, ethnic differences appeared to be more related to cultural factors rather than to contextual ones (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008). Specifically, African Americans and Latinos scored higher than did European Americans on the use of parental monitoring, after contextual variables were in the model (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008). In addition, results from within-group analyses showed that Filipinos scored much lower than South Asians in the use of parental monitoring. These differences, however, were less apparent when controlling for parents’ age of arrival to the United States and parental language fluency. On the other hand, when controlling for parental English language use with the child and the importance of cultural values for independence and interdependence, the significant differences between Filipinos and Chinese reappeared. Further, both Chao and Murry found that parental monitoring was related to cultural factors for both Latinos and African Americans, respectively. Contextual factors also explained differential use of parental monitoring within African Americans (Murry et al., 2008), which included the occurrence of stressful life events, parents’ and youth’s reports of racial discriminatory exposure, and residing in an unsupportive neighborhood. In addition, mother’s education, owning one’s home, as well as rearing their children in cohesive communities, were significant predictors explaining variations in levels of parental monitoring among rural African Americans (Murry et al. 2008). In another dataset, initial ethnic differences between African Americans and European Americans were explained by contextual influences in two of three adolescent years (Pinderhughes et al., 2008).

Family Communication

Among mothers of kindergarteners, ethnicity did not predict adaptive communication. Rather, contextual variables of neighborhood characteristics and socioeconomic status emerged as significant predictors of adaptive communication about positive events (Hill & Tyson, 2008). Similarly, Pinderhughes found that neighborhood quality and maternal depression predicted communication. Across datasets, results revealed that some ethnic differences remained significant after controlling for various contextual influences. With contextual variables accounted for, African American mothers of fourth graders (as opposed to mothers of kindergarteners) were less communicative than European American mothers about negative events and emotions with their children (Hill & Tyson, 2008). With children of certain ages, African American mothers scored higher on positive communication than European American mothers (Hill & Tyson, 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2008). Findings from within-group analyses showed that cultural variables, such as ethnic pride and awareness of discrimination, were positively related to communication (Hill & Tyson, 2008; Murry et al., 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2008). Specifically, rural African American single mothers who viewed religion as important were more likely to embrace open communication in their families (Murry et al., 2008). Additionally, Hill found that emphasizing ethnic pride was a significant predictor of adaptive communication about negative events for African American mothers, and Pinderhughes reported that adolescents’ alertness to discrimination was linked to parent-child communication.

Parental Self-Efficacy

Findings from our combined analyses revealed that parental self-efficacy does, indeed, appear to be linked
to ethnicity, such that African American parents report
greater levels of efficacy as parents beyond the
unique contributions of contextual variables (Hill, &
Tyson, 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2008). After control-
ling for contextual variables, African American mothers
in Hill’s sample reported greater parental self-efficacy
than European American mothers of kindergarten-age
children. In addition, African American parents were
more likely to view themselves as efficacious parents
when they endorsed cultural values related to rearing
children. Among African American parents of kindergar-
teners, for instance, those who more strongly endorsed
instilling ethnic pride in their children reported higher
levels of parental efficacy (Hill & Tyson, 2008). In a sam-
ple of Latina mothers with infants, the contextual vari-
ables predicting maternal self-efficacy varied by infants’
age. Whereas at six months of age, mothers’ annual
income predicted maternal efficacy, at 12 months of
age, maternal depression emerged as a contextual predic-
tor of parental efficacy (Le & Lambert, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The aim of these cross-ethnic data analyses was to
identify patterns to increase our understanding of the
linkages among ethnicity, culture, contextual factors,
and parenting. Our findings shed light on several “(mis)-
assumptions” about ethnic or cultural differences in par-
enting. For example, African American parents in our
studies perceived themselves to be competent with the
skills necessary to efficiently and effectively fulfill the
tasks associated with rearing competent children.
Self-perceived parenting competence will undoubtedly
influence the process of parenting and child development.
In Bogenschneider, Small, and Tsay’s (1997) study,
mothers and fathers who self-reported more parenting
competence had adolescents who reported higher levels
of parental monitoring and responsiveness. Contrary to
descriptions of ethnic minorities, in particular African
Americans, in extant studies, parents in our studies were
more likely to engage in warm behaviors with their chil-
dren. Additionally, Latinos had a greater likelihood of
engaging in this practice than did European American
parents. The findings on parental warmth for African
Americans however are a bit more complicated in that
textual factors seem to explain these differences
between African Americans and European Americans.

It is noteworthy that, across the majority of our
ethnic minority parents, increased reports of parental
efficacy as well as parental warmth, monitoring, and
family communication were heightened when cultural
variables were included in the models. Similarly, other
researchers found that cultural values reflected in levels
of acculturation are associated with parenting strategies
among Latino families (Buriel, 1993; Hill, Bush, et al.,
2003). Conversely, although African Americans and
Latinos reported using psychological control, such
parenting often occurred when cultural values were
low. Thus, the results underscore the importance of incor-
porating culturally specific variables in order to under-
stand and predict behavior in several parenting domains.

Across our combined analyses, several culturally
specific processes emerged as significant predictors of
parenting behavior. Cultural processes related to ethnic
identity, religiosity, and acculturation emerged as salient
constructs in our analyses within specific racial/ethnic
groups. More specifically, significant cultural factors
included ethnic pride, awareness of discrimination,
native language fluency, English language use, amount
of time in the United States, and values of independence
and interdependence. We should note that previous
research on the impact of acculturation among Latino
parents has produced somewhat mixed results. Among
identified maternal acceptance as a stronger protective
factor for children of Spanish-speaking mothers,
compared to children of English-speaking Mexican
American mothers. Yet, in a sample of 167 Mexican
American families, Parke and colleagues (2004) found
that maternal acculturation was associated with hostile
parenting behavior, such that hostile control strategies
decreased as level of acculturation increased. Similarly,
generational status among Chinese American families
has been associated with beneficial characteristics of
authoritative parenting style (Chao, 2001).

Interestingly, the use of behavioral control was more
likely to be associated with contextual/socioeconomic fac-
tors (in the Asian American and European American com-
parison and in the African American and European
American comparison) rather than cultural factors. It is
not surprising that parents must tailor their parental strate-
gies to meet the demands of financial and contextual stres-
sors, such as neighborhood dangers and disadvantages.
Impoverished neighborhood conditions have been associat-
ed with lower levels of maternal warmth (Klebanov et al.,
1994; Pinderhughes et al. & the Conduct Problems Preven-
tion Research Group, 2001). Moreover, successful parents
in poor, high-risk neighborhoods tend to rely upon strict
monitoring, control, and firm disciplinary practices
(Baldwin et al., 1990; Brody et al., 2001; Furstenberg,
1993; Gonzales et al., 1996; Sampson & Groves, 1989).

Our findings also highlight the central role of socio-
economic status on parenting. Studies linking poverty
to parenting contend that financial strain compromises
parenting through its negative influence on parents’
psychological functioning (Brody et al., 2001; McLoyd,
1990; Murry et al., 2002). Indeed, previous researchers
have documented a connection between economic
strain and depressive symptoms in European American
parents (Conger & Elder, 1994; Pinderhughes et al., 2000), African American parents (Brody & Flor, 1998; McLoey et al., 1994; Pinderhughes et al., 2000), and Latino parents (Dennis et al., 2003; Parke et al., 2004). Conversely, financial stability facilitates psychological well-being that, in turn, increases effective parenting. Given this, one would expect increases in parental warmth and less evidence of psychological control and behavioral control among African Americans of high socioeconomic status.

Among the contextual factors included in our studies, socioeconomic status deserves specific attention. In the present investigations, indicators of socioeconomic status appear to be of greater importance for African Americans and European Americans than any of the other ethnic groups included in our analyses. In fact, socioeconomic status often emerged as a significant factor, but more often differentiated the parenting behaviors of African Americans on several parenting domains. Socioeconomic factors were predictive of variations in parental warmth, use of behavioral control, psychological control, parental monitoring, and family communication patterns but not parental efficacy. The reasons why these patterns were more pronounced among African Americans than other ethnic minorities remain unclear.

We hope that our combined findings present an initial step towards exploring and identifying what Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996) termed adaptive cultural practices, specifically defined as “culturally defined coping mechanisms to the demands placed by the promoting and inhibiting environments (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, and health care systems)” (p. 1904). Much more scholarly work is needed in order to unravel the complex interplay of contextual/socioeconomic and cultural factors on parenting behavior and developmental outcomes for children. In sum, we acknowledge that contextual factors play an influential role, but at the same time, emphasize the need to consider the unique contribution of culture and family characteristics in understanding parenting among and within ethnic minorities.

LIMITATIONS

A unique strength of this project was the careful coordination of analyses across datasets and a priori definition of parenting, cultural, and contextual constructs and research questions. However, a number of limitations are also noted, with some of them addressable in future analyses. First, there was a wide variation in sample sizes across studies, resulting in limited power in some cases. Sample sizes range from 40 in one study to close to 3,000 in another study. Issues relating to power need to be addressed in future analyses. Further, in the current investigations, some findings are present with rather small effect sizes. Additionally, while some samples included a number of ethnic subgroups within one panethnic group, such as Chinese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, and Vietnamese, other samples only included one ethnic group, such as African Americans or Latinas.

Second, as we noted in the introduction (Le et al.), we did not address child and parent gender differences across studies, and we lacked specific analyses to detect possible gender differences. Regarding gender of the child, although most studies included balanced samples of male/female youth, our analyses did not include consideration of possible differences in mean levels of parenting by gender or possible ethnicity by gender interactions in levels of parenting. Concerning gender of the parent, many of the studies focused on mothers exclusively and relied on maternal self-reports, whereas others did not specify the proportion of mothers and fathers, primarily because child or adolescent reports were relied upon, rather than parents' reports.

Third, there is a fair amount of age variability both within and across studies, with age groups ranging from newborns to adolescents in high school. Most of the studies focused on one specific age group, with some following the particular age group over time. This variation provides possibilities for examining differences in parenting levels by age of the child across studies, and also within a particular study (for a few studies only).

Finally, because of the nature of a meta-analytic based approach, the actual items comprising constructs were not similar across studies. Thus, because those items that were chosen from each study to represent each of the constructs were most often not the full original scale, the number of items used to comprise the new scales were somewhat limited and sometimes resulted in less than ideal internal consistencies. Additionally, our measures of “culture” were also limited to pre-existing variables within studies and did not always represent what our ideal measurement of cultural dynamics would be. Although there were datasets that did incorporate measures for capturing cultural processes, these measures were not originally designed for cross-ethnic or cross-cultural comparisons, and so they often were not comparable to each other. We found capturing cultural processes particularly challenging in the context of this meta-analytic approach, as many of the measures in each dataset were adopted for explaining within-culture variation, rather than across-culture/ethnic variation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By coordinating analyses across datasets, we were able to examine the degree to which ethnic differences in
parenting may be accounted for by contextual factors versus culturally specific processes. While the present findings are an important first step in answering these questions, it is equally valuable to turn our attention to recommendations for future work addressing parenting behavior across racially and ethnically diverse families. First, the present work underscores the importance of attending to and identifying contextual factors that influence parenting behavior. Specifying contextual influences on parenting behavior will necessarily vary by parents’ ethnicity, regional location, neighborhood conditions, etc. Our collective findings also highlight the need to specifically attend to the contextual influences of socioeconomic status on parenting behavior.

Second, in order to fully disentangle the complex relations influencing parenting behavior within specific racial/ethnic groups, samples must be specifically tailored to address these research questions. Large sample sizes that provide adequate numbers within ethnic subgroups (e.g., Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans) will guard against the tendency to overgeneralize and essentialize characteristics to any one racial group (e.g., Latinos). Although not the primary focus of our current investigation, we do report differences in parenting strategies within Asian American subgroups (e.g., Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, and South Asians) and Latino subgroups (e.g., Central Americans and Mexican Americans). Future research will need to grapple with complicated issues regarding the measurement of constructs in different racial groups. For instance, we must explore whether it is possible or even desirable to have the same parenting measures work equally well across different cultural groups.

Third, future work must also attend to issues regarding children’s developmental levels. Not surprisingly, effective parenting strategies will differ for children at different developmental stages.

Fourth, researchers often present parenting as a unidimensional phenomenon. In reality, however, parent-child relationships represent more fluid, dyadic processes, with both members of the dyad contributing to each other’s behavior. Hence, future research must also account for the characteristics that children may contribute, beyond developmental stages, to parent-child relationships and parenting behavior (e.g., temperament, intelligence, school engagement).

Finally, much more work must attend to uncovering and understanding the dynamic cultural processes (e.g., racial socialization strategies, ethnic identity, ethnic values, immigrant status, acculturation) that underlie the findings of cultural differences in parenting across ethnic groups. Such culturally specific processes may be highly specific to families of different ethnic subgroups and may vary by many factors, such as family members’ generational status and the percentage of ethnically similar families in the neighborhood. By the same token, we should be open to identifying commonalities in cultural processes and the experiences of racial minority groups—commonalities, for instance, that may be associated with experiences of racial discrimination or the racial socialization of children of color in the United States. Future in-depth knowledge regarding the interplay of cultural values and processes, contextual factors, and parenting behavior will provide a rich springboard for community-based interventions and public policy work.

We encourage future investigations to continue our efforts to move beyond collapsing ethnicity and culture, which are often characterized as one distal variable in order to explain observed group differences. Instead, we underscore the importance of reconceptualizing ethnicity and culture as distinctive, proximal constructs, for exploring and explaining specific and varied influences that may account for group differences. Further, it is important to recognize that given the complexities of excavating ethnicity, culture, and contextual processes, there is a need for a wide range of research methodologies that can more accurately describe the extent to which ethnicity, culture, and context interact to influence parenting and child outcomes.

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Disentangling ethnic and contextual influences among parents raising youth in high-risk communities.


