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Neighborhood Context, SES, and Parenting: Including a Focus on Acculturation Among Latina Mothers

Rosario Ceballo and Noelle Hurd

University of Michigan

This study examines the influence of contextual factors on parenting strategies among a sample of 104 Latina, European American, and African American mother–child pairs. The parenting constructs under investigation were selected as part of a collaborative research project among members of the parenting subgroup of the Study Group on Race, Culture, and Ethnicity (SCGCE). Hierarchical regression analyses, predicting parenting outcomes, were conducted with mothers’ ethnicity entered in the first step and contextual variables (mothers’ annual income, education, subjective neighborhood rating, and stressful life events) entered second. While there were no significant differences in parenting strategies (parental efficacy, parental monitoring, parental warmth, and psychological control) across the three pan-ethnic groups, a contextual variable—subjective neighborhood quality—was associated with mothers’ sense of parental efficacy and use of psychological control. Among our subsample of 54 Latina mothers, level of acculturation was similarly related to parental sense of self-efficacy and psychological control strategies.

The data relied upon in this study were originally collected to investigate factors that buffer children from the negative influences of community violence exposure. The current measures chosen and analyses conducted were coordinated with members of the parenting subgroup of the Study Group on Race, Culture, and Ethnicity (SGRCE) as part of a collaborative research endeavor. Our study addresses the first question posed in this collective project—“Are there ethnic differences in parenting that remain when contextual variables are controlled?”—among a sample of Latina, European American, and African American mother–child pairs.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 104 mothers or legal guardians and their fourth- or fifth-grade child. We interviewed 93 biological mothers, 7 grandmothers, and 4 legal guardians who all had primary parenting responsibility for their children. (All of these women will be referred to as “mothers.”) Fifty-four percent of the mothers were married. The mothers were an extremely impoverished group, categorizing their median household income as falling within the range of $20,000 and $25,000. Seventy-one percent reported that they had at some point in time received government assistance, and 36% of the mothers were unemployed at the time of the study. The mothers had a mean age of 36 years and an average of 3.3 children. They represented a multiethnic group with 54 Latina, 35 European American, 12 African American, and 3 ethnically unidentified mothers. Among the Latina mothers, the majority was of Mexican American descent; the remaining 25% were Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican. Most of the Latina mothers (83%) spoke Spanish in their homes. Thirty of the Latina mothers were not born in the United States, and 17 of the children participating in this study were not born in the United States. There were 56 female and 48 male children in this sample, with a mean age of 10 years.
Procedure

On two separate occasions, parental recruitment letters describing the study, along with consent forms, were sent home with all of the fourth- and fifth-grade children in two Detroit elementary schools. The schools were located in a poor, high-risk neighborhood corresponding to two census tracts that had median household incomes of $14,257 and $15,057, respectively, and 32% and 42% of the population living below the poverty line in 1989 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). Among the eligible students, 77% of the children in one school and 58% of the children in the other school returned signed consent forms. With only two delivery attempts, and the unrelia-

bility with which young children deliver materials to their parents, our response rates were respectable among this population of poor, highly stressed families. More-

over, recruitment efforts in one school occurred during a busy school time at the end of the school year, partially explaining the lower response rate at that school. Ques-

tionnaires were administered to the 163 children who returned their consent forms. Interviews with the children were conducted at their schools and took approximately two hours, with the inclusion of several scheduled breaks. At one school, children who participated in the study received a $20 gift certificate to Toyst-R-Us. At the other school, the principal requested that participating children receive a pizza party as a token of appreciation.

Upon completion of the child data collection,

mothers of the children were contacted and recruited by phone. Out of 163 children interviewed, 15 children also had a sibling participate in the study, resulting in a total of 148 mothers available for participation. Seven-

ty percent of these eligible mothers were interviewed.

The sample for this study includes only those children whose mothers were also interviewed, resulting in a final sample of 104 mother–child pairs. All of the participat-

ing mothers had one child who participated in the study. For 27 mothers who preferred to have the inter-

view conducted in Spanish, a bilingual research assistant administered an interview that had been translated by a bilingual teacher at one of the schools and then back-

translated by a bilingual graduate student. Mothers were paid $50 for their participation in an interview lasting about two hours.

Measures

As described in the introduction, parenting and context-

tual variables for this study were selected after repeated consultations with the other parenting subgroup members of SGRCE. Only those items that received a consensus from the entire study group as measuring the constructs of interest were included. Alphas for all our measures are .60 or above for both the full sample and subsample of Latina mothers. Higher scores always indicate better quality or higher levels of the construct being measured.

Contextual Variables

Subjective Neighborhood Quality. This scale consists of 10 items that assess mothers’ overall assessment of the quality of their neighborhoods (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002). Specifically, maternal appraisals of neighborhood factors such as the quality of police protection, public transportation, crime, drug activity, and community involvement are elicited. Mothers rate their neighbor-

hoods on a 7-point Likert scale from “very poor” to “very good.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .78.

Stressful Life Events. This scale represents the num-

ber of stressful life events experienced by mothers in the past year. Mothers indicated whether a checklist of 20 highly stressful things happened to them. The list includes stressful events like the loss of a job, home evic-

tion, and divorce, as well as highly traumatic events like the death of a child or another family member. The list of items was adapted from a stress scale developed by Watts-Jones (1990) for African American women.

Mothers’ Educational Level. Mothers’ educational level was assessed with one item that asked mothers to indicate the highest level of education completed. Mothers responded by selecting an answer from the following seven options: 1 = some grammar school, 2 = some high school, 3 = high school degree or GED, 4 = some vocational/trade school, 5 = some college, 6 = a 4-year college degree, and 7 = a professional degree.

Mothers’ Annual Personal Income. Mothers were asked to indicate where their annual personal income fell in a range from “under $5,000” to “$40,000–

$45,000,” with categories rising in $5,000 increments. These categorical groupings were converted to a continuous measure by assigning the midpoint dollar amount of each interval to that category’s range.

Parenting Variables

Parental Efficacy. Parental efficacy was assessed with three items that asked mothers to indicate how often they felt “overwhelmed by parenting demands,” “as if you are not in control as a parent,” and “stressed and worried about the demands of parenting in your neighbor-

hood.” Mothers responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “never” to “almost always.” These questions were specifically developed for the Neighborhood Violence Study, the original study for which these data were collected. Reliability for this sample was acceptable (α = .60).
Parental Monitoring. A child-report measure of parental monitoring assessed children’s report of their parent’s supervision and awareness of their whereabouts, activities, and playmates (Small & Kerns, 1993). Children were asked to indicate how often 10 statements were true for them and their parents. They responded to these items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “never” to “almost always.” Sample statements included, “My parent(s) know where I am after school” and “I tell my parent(s) who I’m going to be with before I go out.” Cronbach’s alpha was .84.

A parent-report measure of parental monitoring used the same 10 items to measure mothers’ knowledge of their children’s activities and friends. Mothers indicated how often the statements were true for them on a similar 5-point scale. Sample statements were “How often do you know where your child is after school?” and “How often does your child tell you who s/he is going to be with before s/he goes out?” Reliability was acceptable for this sample (x = .60).

Parental Warmth. Parental warmth was measured with four items from a modified version of the Block Child Rearing Practices Report (Rickel & Biasatti, 1982). Using a 7-point scale, mothers indicated how much they agreed with the following items: “I joke and play with my child,” “I make sure my child knows that I appreciate what s/he tries to accomplish,” “I express my affection by hugging, kissing, and holding my child,” and “I feel that a child should be aware of how much I sacrifice for him or her.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .76.

Psychological Control. Nine items from a modified version of the Block Child Rearing Practices Report (Rickel & Biasatti, 1982) were used to assess strategies of psychological control. Sample items include, “I believe a child should be aware of how much I sacrifice for him or her,” “I teach my child that in one way or another, punishment will find him or her when s/he is bad,” and “I control my child by warning him or her about the bad things that can happen to him or her.” Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .66.

Cultural Variables

Acculturation. Because the original study for which this data was collected did not include Latino cultural variables, a composite measure was created as a proxy to represent level of acculturation, solely for the Latina mother subsample. Mothers received one point for each of the following three criteria: (1) if the mother was born in the United States, (2) if the mother’s child was born in the United States, and (3) if the mother requested to be interviewed in English when given a choice of Spanish or English. On the final factor, Latina mothers were evenly divided, with 27 preferring to be interviewed in Spanish and 27 in English. This index ranged from 0 to 3, with higher numbers reflecting greater acculturation to U.S. culture. Although not ideal, brief measures of acculturation similar to the one just described have been used in other studies that have assessed the influence of acculturation on parenting attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Acevedo, 2000; Eamon & Mulder, 2005; Ispa et al., 2004; Plunkett & Bámaca-Gómez, 2003).

Religiosity. A subjective religiosity subscale from Levin, Taylor, and Chatters’ (1995) multidimensional measure of religious involvement was used for the within-group analyses among Latina mothers. Originally designed to measure religiosity among African Americans, this measure was adapted for a Latino sample. Mothers responded to seven items asking them about their personal involvement (e.g., reading religious books and praying) and beliefs in the importance of religion. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .63.

RESULTS

Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were used to compare European American, African American, and Latina mothers on each of the parenting outcome measures: parental report of parental efficacy, parental monitoring, parental warmth, and psychological control and child report of parental monitoring. There were no significant differences in parenting strategies between our three ethnic groups. Likewise, no significant ethnic group differences emerged on several demographic indicators tested, including personal annual income, educational level, occupation, or number of children.

As with the other researchers in the SGRCE, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses to address the first research question posed in our collective investigation and highlighted in the introduction, “Are there ethnic differences in parenting accounted for by contextual factors?” Mothers’ ethnicity was entered in step 1 and the contextual variables were entered in the second step. Since there were no mean differences in parenting strategies across ethnic groups, we did not expect ethnic differences to emerge in these regressions. However, similar analyses were conducted for the sake of continuity with the other researchers. Two dummy variables were created to code mothers’ ethnicity with a Latina variable coded 1 for Latina mothers and 0 for all others, and an African American variable coded 1 for African American mothers and 0 for all others. Contextual variables included mothers’ annual personal income and educational attainment to assess SES, overall subjective neighborhood quality, and stressful life events. In regressions predicting child-reported monitoring, parent-reported monitoring and warmth, none of our
Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Efficacy and Psychological Control (N = 104)

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<th>Predictor Variables</th>
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<th>Psychological Control</th>
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<td>Mothers’ annual income</td>
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<td>Mothers’ education</td>
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<td>Subjective neighborhood quality</td>
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<td>Stressful life events</td>
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<td>(.03)</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>1.98**</td>
<td>3.27**</td>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
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*a Mothers’ ethnicity: 0 = not Latina; 1 = Latina.
*b Mothers’ ethnicity: 0 = not African American; 1 = African American.
*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01; ****p < .001.

To specifically explore cultural factors that may influence mothers’ parenting behavior, we next focused exclusively on our subsample of 54 Latina mothers. We measured acculturation on a four-point index ranging from 0 to 3, and found the Latino mothers had a mean score of 1.6 on level of acculturation. Among these mothers, acculturation was significantly associated with two indicators of socioeconomic status. Not surprisingly, higher annual incomes (r = .30, p < .05) and higher levels of education (r = .39, p < .01) were significantly associated with greater acculturation to U.S. culture. Correlational analyses indicated that level of acculturation was also linked to parental behavior. Acculturation was significantly associated with the use of psychological control and approached significance with mothers’ parental efficacy. Higher scores on acculturation were correlated with less endorsement of parental sense of efficacy (r = −.26, p = .06) and less reliance on psychological control strategies (r = −.36, p < .01).

Although we did not find that ethnicity explained any variance in parenting after accounting for contextual factors in previous analyses, we utilized hierarchical regressions to predict parenting strategies within the Latina subgroup. These within-group analyses are in keeping with those performed by other members of the study group who found that ethnicity remained significant when accounting for contextual variables. Predictors of parenting behavior in these analyses included culturally relevant factors (level of acculturation and subjective religiosity) and contextual measures (personal annual income, level of education, and subjective neighborhood quality). In this rather small subsample of Latina mothers, the cultural variables did not emerge as significant predictors of parenting.

Summary of Findings

In our full sample, taxing neighborhood conditions and stressful life experiences impaired mothers’ sense of parental confidence. Mothers’ perceptions of neighborhood quality were also related to use of psychological control strategies, such that better neighborhood quality ratings were associated with greater use of psychological control. This was an unexpected finding, and it may reflect mothers’ ability to direct more energy on parenting (even in less supportive ways) when they are less concerned about external neighborhood conditions. These relations existed across an ethnically diverse sample of mothers and highlight the need to better understand the role of contextual factors in parenting. Indeed, certain contextual factors associated with living in urban poverty may have similar influences on parenting, irrespective of mothers’ racial and ethnic background.
Among the Latina mothers, parental self-efficacy was further diminished with increases in acculturation. Declines in mothers’ parenting confidence with acculturation may reflect the competing tensions inherent in simultaneously balancing two sets of cultural norms when making parental decisions. The links between acculturation and less psychological control may, as Parke and colleagues (2004) suggest, represent greater exposure to a variety of parenting strategies in the United States. Important limitations occurred because our data were originally collected to investigate mediators that buffer children from the negative impact of community violence exposure on psychological well-being. Thus, it is important to note that the lack of findings reported in parenting behavior across the three ethnic groups in our full sample may be due to the relatively small sample sizes of the subgroups and the corresponding lack of statistical power. Finally, our indicators of acculturation for Latina mothers were also limited by the pre-existing demographic variables in our data set.

REFERENCES


