

Parenting practices and childhood anxiety reporting in Mexican, Mexican American, and European American families

Timothy M. Luis, R. Enrique Varela^{*}, Kathryn W. Moore

Department of Psychology, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118, United States

Received 29 May 2007; received in revised form 31 October 2007; accepted 1 November 2007

Abstract

Parenting practices reflecting over-control and lack of warmth and acceptance are associated with childhood anxiety in white non-Latino populations. In this study, we examined whether these parenting practices were related to childhood anxiety in Mexican-descent children. Mexican (M: $n = 46$), Mexican American (MA: $n = 48$), and European American (EA: $n = 47$) families discussed three ambiguous, potentially anxiety provoking situations. Transcribed discussions were coded for parenting practices reflecting control and lack of warmth and acceptance. Controlling practices were associated with more anxiety for the M and EA groups and with less anxiety for the MA group. The MA parents generated more verbalizations indicative of control than the M parents and more verbalizations indicative of lack of warmth and acceptance than the EA parents. Implications for our understanding of anxiety development in Latino children are discussed.

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Keywords: Children; Anxiety; Parenting; Mexican American; Culture; Latin American; Mental health; Cross-cultural; Latino; Hispanic

Current models of anxiety development in children emphasize contributions of biological and social environmental factors to the etiology and maintenance of anxiety (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Manassis & Bradley, 1994). In the social environmental area, contribution of family processes to anxiety development has been of recent interest to researchers (Dadds & Barrett, 1996; Ginsburg, Siqueland, Masia-Warner, & Hedtke, 2004; Rapee, 1997). In particular, a lack of parental acceptance and warmth along with control of children's behavior are two parenting approaches that have been consistently associated with clinical anxiety in children. This body of research, however, has been conducted almost exclusively with white non-Latino

families placing minimal attention on the effects that cultural context may have on the influence of familial transactions on children's anxiety. Thus, whether anxiety models that take family processes into consideration apply to ethnic minorities including Latin Americans is not known.

A focus on parenting practices and anxiety development in Latin Americans is important considering the large and growing number of Latin American children and adolescents in the U.S. (12.3 million: U.S. department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2001) and that they are at risk for anxiety problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). In addition, socio-cultural influences are likely to shape the manner in which parent child interactions give rise to or protect youth from anxiety development (Harre & Parrott, 1996; Kirmayer, Young, & Hayton, 1995). In an effort to increase our understanding of

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: evarela@tulane.edu (R.E. Varela).

anxiety development in relation to family processes in a cultural context, this study examined the relationship between parenting practices and childhood anxiety in Mexican (M), Mexican American (MA), and European American (EA) families. When referring to M and MA families collectively, the referent Mexican-descent is used.

1. Parenting practices and childhood anxiety development

In the child anxiety literature, lack of parental acceptance and warmth is consistently associated with increased levels of anxiety in children (Ginsburg et al., 2004; Rapee, 1997; Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003). Acceptance and warmth refers to the parents' responsiveness, acceptance of children's feelings and behaviors, active listening, praise, and use of reflection (Wood et al., 2003). For example, mothers of clinically anxious children are less likely to listen to their children than mothers of aggressive children (Dadds, Barrett, Rapee, & Ryan, 1996), and are less positive and encouraging than mothers of children with no clinical diagnoses (Hudson & Rapee, 2001) and mothers of children who are considered socially competent (Dumas & LaFreniere, 1993).

Along with a lack of parental acceptance and warmth, parental control (i.e., limiting autonomy and decision-making) is also related to children's elevated expression of anxiety (Rapee, 1997). Parental behavior towards clinically anxious children is more negative, over-involved (Hudson & Rapee, 2002), overprotective (Moore, Whaley, & Sigman, 2004), and less granting of psychological autonomy (Siqueland, Kendall, & Steinberg, 1996) than parenting of non-anxious children. In retrospective studies, adults with an anxiety disorder have been found to report their early family environments as low on warmth and high on overprotection and control (Gerlsma, Emmelkamp, & Arrindell, 1990). In addition, the construct of Expressed Emotion (EE), which includes parental emotional overinvolvement with children akin to parental control, has been linked with childhood anxiety disorders and may interfere with successful treatment of such disorders (Garcia-Lopez, Espinosa-Fernandez, & Muela, 2007; Hirshfeld, Biederman, Brody, Faraone, & Rosenbaum, 1997).

Evidence is strong that particular parenting practices co-occur with anxiety expression in children. Regarding mechanisms responsible for these associations, researchers propose that a parenting approach that is lacking in warmth and acceptance may be sending a message to children that they will receive little or no support when

engaging novel situations. The children could then develop a sense of helplessness likely contributing to anxiety development. Along similar lines, controlling parents do not allow their children the freedom to explore their environment independently, possibly making them feel insecure about their abilities to navigate their surroundings successfully (Rapee, 1997). When the children's sense of control is compromised and subdued through parental control, these children may develop a schema that their environment is a threatening one and that they should avoid any situations they perceive as challenging or potentially harmful (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Moore et al., 2004).

1.1. Parenting practices, Mexican culture and anxiety

Cultural contexts are known to influence the relationship between particular parenting practices and children's outcomes. For instance, like with white non-Latinos, acceptance and warmth are associated with positive outcomes such as decreased conduct problems and depressive symptoms for MA children (Dumka, Roosa, & Jackson, 1997; Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 1996; Gonzales, Pitts, Hill, & Roosa, 2000). However, authoritarian practices have more variable effects in MA children, often neutral (Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003; Ispa et al., 2004; Lindahl & Malik, 1999). Similar to a controlling parenting approach, authoritarian parenting is characterized by parental demands of unquestioning obedience from children and enforcement of rules through power assertion (Baumrind, 1971). To date, the relation of anxiety in MA children to parental control and lack of acceptance and warmth have not been examined in the same study.

One possible explanation for the varying effects that authoritarian parenting may have on MA children is that such practices may be associated with adverse emotions and negative intentions in individualistic cultures but not so in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Latino and Asian cultures), in which such harsh and strict practices may signal good parenting (Grusec, Rudy, & Martini, 1997). This type of parenting is consistent with Latino cultural values and beliefs. For instance, Latinos value devotion to the family (*familismo*), with members often subjugating their individual goals in favor of needs of the family as a whole (Chandler, Tsai, & Wharton, 1999; Zayas & Solari, 1994). Devotion to family also calls for unquestioning deference and respect for one's parents and grandparents (*respeto*) (Zayas & Solari, 1994).

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