



## Parenting strategies and socio-cultural influences in childhood anxiety: Mexican, Latin American descent, and European American families

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 24 March 2008

Received in revised form 19 January 2009

Accepted 19 January 2009

#### Keywords:

Children

Anxiety

Parenting

Mexican American

Culture

Latin American

Mental health

Cross-cultural

Latino

Hispanic

Youth

### ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between anxiety in Latin American children and Latino cultural schemas, parenting strategies, being an ethnic minority, and assimilation. Latin American ( $n = 72$ ; LA) and white European-American ( $n = 46$ ; EA) children living in the U.S., Mexican children living in Mexico ( $n = 99$ ; M), and at least one parent per family ( $n = 283$ ) were administered measures assessing anxiety, parenting strategies, collectivism, family cohesion, simpatia, parent–child communication, and assimilation. M and LA children expressed more anxiety symptoms than EA children. More mother control and less father acceptance were associated with childhood anxiety across all three groups. However, father control was associated with more anxiety for the EA group but not the MA group, and mother acceptance was associated with more anxiety for the EA and MA groups but with less anxiety for the M group. Family cohesion was negatively associated with children's anxiety independent of ethnic group. Finally, differing from parents in assimilation did not influence LA children's anxiety.

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Current models of anxiety development in children emphasize the transactional nature of constitutional (e.g., genetics, temperament, cognitive biases) and psychosocial (e.g., attachment, parent–child interactions, life experiences) variables associated with anxiety (Barlow, 2002; Manassis & Bradley, 1994). It is widely believed that culture can impact any of these dimensions, and the manner in which they interact to produce risk to or protection from the emergence and maintenance of anxiety (Harre & Parrott, 1996). To date, however, there is minimal research linking specific cultural characteristics and anxiety. In this study, we focused on the relationship between culture and anxiety in Latino youth: a segment of the population that may be at risk for anxiety problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Culture as a construct has been defined in a variety of ways in the literature (Eagleton, 2000). Here, we adopt the designation that culture is “Shared learned behavior which is transmitted from one generation to another for purposes of individual and societal growth, adjustment, and adaptation; culture is represented externally as artifacts, roles and institutions, and it is represented internally as values, beliefs, attitudes, epistemology,

consciousness, and biological functioning.” (Marsella, 1988, pp. 8–9). Groups of individuals therefore can be attributed cultural designations based on shared schemas (e.g., a collectivistic orientation) and shared socialization (e.g., controlling parenting). From this perspective, culture based schemas and socialization practices present natural foci for the understanding of the relationship between culture and anxiety. For instance, children's schemas and parent–child interactions can vary widely between European American and Latino groups (Marin & Marin, 1991), and such variability in these areas is likely to shape the manner in which children experience affect, interpret and give meaning to symptoms, and express emotional distress (Kirmayer, 2001).

The anxiety literature points to more similarities than differences between Latin American and white non-Latino children; however, when differences are found, these indicate that Latin American children report more anxiety than white non-Latino children (Pina & Silverman, 2004; Silverman, La Greca, & Wasserstein, 1995; Varela et al., 2004; Varela, Weems, Berman, Hensley, & de Bernal, 2007). Although mechanisms leading to such differences have yet to be elucidated, one possibility is that in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Latino) an emphasis on self-control, emotional restraint, and compliance with social norms may lead to the development of overcontrolled or “internalizing” behaviors (e.g., shyness, anxiety,

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fear); whereas “externalizing” behavior problems may be more closely linked to individualistic oriented cultures (e.g., white European American) (Ollendick, Yang, King, Dong, & Akande, 1996; Weisz, Suwanlert, Chaiyasit, & Walter, 1987). In collectivistic cultures, then, youth may exhibit more internalizing symptoms because these behaviors are valued as a manner of emotion expression (Weisz et al., 1987).

In Latino culture, putative factors leading to internalizing symptoms (e.g., social conformity, self-restraint, and suppression of emotions) may be represented in the constructs of *simpatia*, *collectivism*, and a strong family orientation. *Simpatia* is a Latino cultural script that emphasizes need for promoting behaviors that result in pleasant social interactions and harmony in interpersonal relationships (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). Collectivism refers to defining one’s social identity including behaviors and self-worth in reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of valued groups (e.g., classmates; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A family orientation includes an individual’s strong identification and emotional bonds with immediate and extended family, including having strong feelings of cohesion among family members (Marin & Marin, 1991; Triandis et al., 1984).

*Simpatia*, *collectivism*, and a strong family orientation may also be related to high anxiety in Latino youth considering the Latino cultural perspective that mental health problems carry a significant social stigma and shame implications for the individual and the family (Salman, Diamond, Jusino, Sanchez-LaCay, & Liebowitz, 1997). A strong group and family orientation in combination with wanting to maintain agreeable relationships (i.e., *simpatia*) may lead children to believe that they should not bother family members with emotional difficulties or even expression of feelings so as not to worry them or disrupt family harmony possibly by bringing shame to the group (Varela et al., 2004). Paradoxically, reluctance to disclose or discuss emotional material may inadvertently contribute to increased anxiety by reducing opportunities for individually focused problem solving, and understanding and managing emotional experiences (Suveg, Zeman, Flannery-Schroeder, & Cassano, 2005). Parents themselves may reinforce low emotion expressivity by being less open in communication with their children.

An alternative manner in which cultural schemas relate to anxiety in Latino youth is in a protective fashion. In particular, a strong family orientation has been linked to less mental health problems in Latinos (Hernandez, Plant, Sachs-Ericsson, & Joiner, 2005). Theoretically, having a close knit group with which to identify may facilitate children’s sense of identity and increase their ability to cope with psychosocial stressors.

Parenting strategies are known to result in varying developmental outcomes depending on the cultural context in which they occur (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). In white non-Latino populations, lack of parental acceptance and warmth, and high parental control of children’s behavior are associated with anxiety symptoms in children (Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003). In Latin American populations, similar to white non-Latinos, acceptance and warmth are consistently associated with positive outcomes (e.g., less disruptive behaviors and depressive symptoms) (Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003). However, controlling or authoritarian practices in Latin American samples appear to lead to neutral or positive effects in children (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006).

One possibility that authoritarian, controlling parenting does not lead to negative outcomes for Latin American youth is that this approach is a valued socialization mechanism in Latino culture used to instill a sense of respect for authority figures and foster family loyalty in children (Halgunseth et al., 2006). One could reasonably speculate that this cultural perspective may lead to positive appraisals of controlling parenting by Latin American children and not result in anxiety. For example, parental control for Latin American children may not lead to a sense of insecurity in

one’s abilities to confront novel surroundings successfully or to the perception that the environment is threatening, both purported mechanisms linking controlling parenting to anxious behaviors (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998).

Examination of culture’s influence on anxiety in Latin American youth can be confounded by the psychosocial context in which they live. In particular, as ethnic minorities, Latin American youth in the U.S. face a number of stressors such as discrimination, lower access to health care and education, and poverty (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003). Of relevance is the association between psychosocial stressors and poor adjustment in youth (Compas, 1987). In addition, Latin American youth in the U.S. face a number of unique socio-cultural circumstances related to the acculturation process that have implications for their adjustment. For example, expectations to speak Spanish at home and to subscribe to traditional family and gender roles espoused by parents, and being placed in a position to translate for older non-English speaking family members can all be stressful for Latino youth (Weisskirch & Alva, 2002).

## 1. Current study

To date, the majority of research that examines influence of parenting on anxiety development has compared children with anxiety disorders and children with no psychopathology (Wood et al., 2003). Although this research has advanced our understanding of anxiety development in extreme forms (e.g., clinically diagnosed), determining if established links between parenting and child anxiety exist in normative samples is an important first step in establishing whether such influences could lead to anxiety disorders in Latin American youth.

It is unclear what the influence of culture is on anxiety in Latin American youth. Specifically, it is uncertain if Latin American youth report more anxiety due to being ethnic minorities or due to influences of culture based schemas (i.e., *simpatia*, *collectivism*, *family orientation*), or some combination of both factors. In addition, a strong family orientation may be a protective factor rather than a risk factor in anxiety development. Influence of parenting strategies on children’s anxiety may also vary across cultural groups. To distinguish between features of Latino culture associated with anxiety and effects related to being an ethnic minority, this study included both Latino families considered ethnic minorities in their social context (Latin Americans in the U.S.: LA) and Latino families considered an ethnic majority in their social context, Mexicans living in Mexico (M), and European American families in the U.S. (EA). We also examined how differences in acculturation between LA parents and their children may impact children’s anxiety. Specifically, we assessed the acculturation strategy of assimilation, which refers to the degree to which an individual seeks contact and interactions with the host cultural group while moving away from one’s own culture (Berry, 2002).

## 2. Hypotheses

Due to the cultural similarities between LAs and Ms, and based on the literature, we expected these two groups would be similar in parenting strategies, and cultural schemas. Based on the literature, Mexican and LA parents were expected to be more controlling than the EA parents, but the three groups were not expected to differ in warmth and acceptance. Regarding cultural influences on anxiety, we examined whether *simpatia*, *collectivism*, a strong family orientation, and low family communication would be associated with greater reporting of anxiety, or in the case of a strong family orientation, less reporting of anxiety. Regarding the effects of parenting on anxiety, we expected that lack of warmth and acceptance would relate to anxiety in the same way across the three groups. We hypothesized that ethnicity would moderate the relationship

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