



Parenting practices, interpretive biases, and anxiety in Latino children

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ABSTRACT

A number of factors are believed to confer risk for anxiety development in children; however, cultural variation of purported risk factors remains unclear. We examined relations between controlling and rejecting parenting styles, parental modeling of anxious behaviors, child interpretive biases, and child anxiety in a mixed clinically anxious ($n=27$) and non-clinical ($n=20$) sample of Latino children and at least one of their parents. Families completed discussion-based tasks and questionnaires in a lab setting. Results indicated that child anxiety was: linked with parental control and child interpretive biases, associated with parental modeling of anxious behaviors at a trend level, and not associated with low parental acceptance. Findings that controlling parenting and child interpretive biases were associated with anxiety extend current theories of anxiety development to the Latino population. We speculate that strong family ties may buffer Latino children from detrimental effects of perceived low parental acceptance.

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1. Introduction

A wealth of literature highlights the importance of familial and cognitive influences in the development of child anxiety (Manassis & Bradley, 1994; Pollock, Rosenbaum, Marrs, Miller, & Biederman, 1995; Vasey & Dadds, 2001). To date, however, theoretical models proposed to explain anxiety development in children have been based on research conducted mostly with White, non-Latino populations. Examination of whether such models extend to ethnic minority populations is important for a number of reasons. Some literature is emerging to suggest that such models may not apply to ethnic minorities, including Latino youth (Anderson & Mayes, 2010; Varela & Hensley-Maloney, 2009). Latinos are the most numerous and fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States and approximately 15.4 million are under the age of 18 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). In addition, Latino youth are at higher risk for anxiety problems relative to the corresponding risk for White, non-Latino youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

2001). In this study, we examined associations between parenting practices, children's cognitive biases, and anxiety in Latino youth.

1.1. Parenting practices and child anxiety

Parenting practices indicating control have been associated with child anxiety in several observational studies conducted with White, non-Latino families (Ballash, Leyfer, Buckley, & Woodruff-Borden, 2006; Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003). For instance, during family interactive tasks, parents of children with anxiety disorders grant less autonomy, are more intrusive, and foreclose discussions with their children more often than parents of children without anxiety disorders (e.g., Hudson & Rapee, 2001; Siqueland, Kendall, & Steinberg, 1996). Similarly, parenting practices reflecting rejection of children have been associated with clinical anxiety in children. These parents are less accepting of their children's ideas, display less warmth, and are more judgmental and dismissive (e.g., Dumas, LaFreniere, & Serketic, 1995; Hudson & Rapee, 2001). Additionally, findings from studies employing self-report in lieu of or in addition to behavioral observations are consistent with these results (e.g., Messer & Beidel, 1994; Siqueland et al., 1996; Stark, Humphrey, Crook, & Lewis, 1990).

Theoretically, controlling parenting restricts children from exploring new situations independently and may convey to them that they are incapable of navigating their surroundings successfully. Along these lines, rejection and criticism may thwart

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children's attempts at self-sufficiency. Both of these parenting practices then likely convey to children that they are not in command of their environment and thus live in an unsafe and threatening world, resulting in increased anxiety (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998).

Relevant to the investigation of parenting practices and anxiety in a cultural context is a large body of literature suggesting that Latino parents may utilize strategies reflecting authoritarian parenting more often than White, non-Latino parents in socializing their children (Knight, Virdin, & Roosa, 1994; Varela et al., 2004a). That is, normative parenting in Latin American cultures emphasizes greater unquestioning obedience and respect for authority and less verbal reasoning and discussion from their children relative to normative parenting among majority White, non-Latino parents. Thus, the possibility exists that Latino children are at greater risk for anxiety disorders through exposure to controlling parenting. However, an alternative hypothesis is that because such parenting is expected in Latino culture, particularly of fathers, it is adaptive and does not produce a sense of insecurity in children that it otherwise does in European American culture, and consequently does not increase the risk for anxiety symptoms in Latino children as it does for White, non-Latino children. Providing some support for this hypothesis within a community sample, Luis, Varela, and Moore (2008) found a positive association between parental commands observed during a parent-child interaction task and child-reported anxiety for White, non-Latino children but not for Mexican American children. Consistent with those results, a follow-up study also with a community sample found that child-reported father control was positively related to anxiety for White, non-Latino children but not for Latino children (Varela, Sanchez-Sosa, Biggs, & Luis, 2009). However, in this latter study, mother control was associated with child anxiety regardless of ethnic background.

The parenting literature for Latinos suggests that although controlling practices may be common, Latino parents are also warm and accepting with their children (Staples & Mirande, 1980; Varela et al., 2004a). For instance, Varela et al. (2004a) found that although Mexican American parents rated their parenting as more authoritarian than the parenting of White, non-Latinos, all three groups studied (Mexican, Mexican American, and White, non-Latino) rated their parenting as more authoritative than authoritarian. Considering that rejection/criticism is not normative in Latin American cultures, one would expect this type of parenting to exert a similar influence in Latino children as it does in White, non-Latino children. However, contrary to expectations, one study found that more parental warmth and acceptance was linked to higher child anxiety for White, non-Latino and Mexican American children (Luis et al., 2008). Another study found that less father warmth and acceptance was related to more anxiety for White, non-Latino and Latino children, whereas more mother warmth and acceptance was related to more anxiety for both cultural groups (Varela et al., 2009). Thus, the literature is inconsistent on how lack of acceptance and warmth may relate to child anxiety in Latino populations.

The anxiety literature also points to a relationship between parental modeling of anxiety-related verbalizations and increased anxiety in children. Mothers of clinically anxious children have been found to provide more threat-related interpretations of ambiguous situations when discussing these with their children (Barrett, Rapee, Dadds, & Ryan, 1996; Chorpita, Albano, & Barlow, 1996; Dadds, Barrett, & Rapee, 1996), and are more likely to discuss problems with their children in a catastrophic manner (Moore, Whaley, & Sigman, 2004; Whaley, Pinto, & Sigman, 1999) than mothers of non-anxious children. Modeling is a potent force in socializing children across cultures (Thyer, 1994). Thus, one could postulate that similar to findings from studies with White, non-Latino youth, parental modeling of threat interpretations is associated with increased child anxiety in Latino families. To date,

only one study has examined this relation in a community sample that included mostly Latino children (Varela et al., 2004b). In this study, Varela et al. examined parental interpretations of three ambiguous scenarios during a family discussion task. They did not find an association between the number of anxious interpretations provided by the parents and child anxiety.

1.2. Cognitive biases and child anxiety

Relative to non-anxious children, children with anxiety disorders have been found to provide more interpretations indicative of threat and danger in response to ambiguous scenarios and to provide more responses indicating avoidance (Barrett et al., 1996; Chorpita et al., 1996; Dadds et al., 1996). To date, however, only two studies have examined threat interpretations in a cultural context, and both of these studies employed community samples (Suarez-Morales & Bell, 2006; Varela et al., 2004b). In a study conducted by Suarez-Morales and Bell (2006), African American, Latino, and White, non-Latino children were administered a measure of worry/oversensitivity and a measure of information processing including interpretation, subjective probability in judgments, and problem solving biases in response to ambiguous hypothetical situations. Findings indicated no differences in the manner in which worry related to interpretive biases between Latino and White, non-Latino children. Specifically, worry was a significant predictor of negative spontaneous interpretations and ratings of threat for the ambiguous situations independent of cultural group. Varela et al. (2004b) examined whether Mexican and Mexican American children produced more somatic and anxious interpretations of ambiguous scenarios than White, non-Latino children and whether these interpretations were related to anxiety reporting. The three groups did not differ in the percent of total interpretations generated that indicated anxiety, and interpretations were not related to anxiety for the entire sample.

1.3. Present study

The literature dealing with mechanisms of child anxiety has largely neglected potential culture-specific effects on such mechanisms. A universal approach to this area of research would call for uniform effects across cultures; however, on theoretical grounds, some known risk factors for child anxiety (e.g., parental control) may be expected to have variable effects depending on the cultural context in which they are embedded. On the other hand, other risk factors (e.g., cognitive biases) are expected to produce similar results independent of the cultural environment. Unfortunately, the literature focusing on child anxiety in Latinos is limited and has lacked a clear pattern of results. One possible reason for inconsistent findings in this area may be that such literature has focused on community samples, thus failing to replicate or refute existing associations found in the broader child anxiety literature, which has focused mostly on youth diagnosed with anxiety disorders or compared clinically anxious youth to non-clinical controls. Another reason that inconsistent findings may exist in the literature regarding risk factors for anxiety among Latino children may be that this literature has not considered or has neglected to account for the effect of basic demographic variables known to affect child anxiety levels. For example, some studies incorporating Latino youth in their samples indicate that girls report higher levels of anxiety than boys (Ginsburg & Silverman, 1996; Silverman, La Greca, & Wasserstein, 1995; Weems & Costa, 2005). In addition, failure to account for global parent anxiety levels may also obscure relations between more concrete parental behaviors, such as modeling of interpretation biases, and children's anxiety. In this study, we include a mixed sample of clinically anxious Latino youth and Latino youth with no psychiatric conditions, focus on a restricted age range (7–13 year

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