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Pedro Solís-Cámara
*Mexican Social Security Institute*

Robert A. Fox
*Marquette University, robert.fox@marquette.edu*

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Parenting Among Mothers with Young Children in Mexico and the United States

Robert Fox
Parenting Center, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI
Pedro Solís-Cáamara
Mexican Social Security Institute

Abstract
Parenting practices and developmental expectations were examined in a sample of 138 mothers with very young children from Mexico and the United States. Mothers from both countries had completed 12 years of formal education and were similar in terms of socioeconomic and marital status. The age and sex of the focus children were similar in both samples. The Parent Behavior Checklist (PBC), a 100-item rating scale that measures parents' developmental expectations and their discipline and nurturing practices, was used. Mothers in Mexico and the United States did not differ significantly in their developmental expectations or parenting practices. All mothers adapted their parenting practices to the age of the child, a finding consistent with other research.

The family, with its complex and ongoing bidirectional, interactive processes among family members, has been recognized for some time as important in the socialization of children (Maccoby, 1992; Maccoby & Martin,
More recently, the unique contribution of culture to parenting practices (Bornstein, 1991; Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994) and related child outcomes (Steinberg, Dombusch, & Brown, 1992) has attracted increasing interest. Planning and implementing socialization studies across different cultures presents a multitude of inherent difficulties. Bornstein (1991) listed a number of infrastructure challenges inherent in conducting cross-cultural research (e.g., establishing collegial relationships, building laboratories, recruiting participants, coping with interruptions in postal and telephone service). When language barriers and inadequate cross-cultural measurement tools are added to the research equation (Knight, Tein, Shell, & Roosa, 1992), the task of conducting even simple descriptive studies across different cultures can be formidable. However, the potential benefit of such work is clear. Including culture as an independent variable in socialization studies may produce new insights into mainstream developmental issues (Rogoff & Morelli, 1989; Tronick, 1992). Moreover, such studies may contribute timely knowledge and offer needed direction to educational efforts (e.g., parent education) for the increasingly culturally diverse population in the United States.

The present study was designed to begin the development of an empirical database on one aspect of the family in Mexico, namely, parenting very young children. As in other Latin American countries, the study of parenting in Mexico is extremely limited (Solis-Camara & Diaz, 1991). Most of what is known comes indirectly from studies of Hispanic families living in the United States (Harwood & Miller, 1991; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cora, & Ocampo, 1993; Mindel, 1980). Not surprisingly, inconsistent evidence has emerged regarding socialization processes in Hispanic families (Knight et al., 1992). For example, Julian et al. (1994) reported descriptions of Hispanic parents in the literature ranging from permissive to rigid and from authoritarian to affectionate and nurturing. These inconsistencies are influenced by a number of factors, including the participants' socioeconomic status (Jaramillo & Zapata, 1987), degree of acculturation (Taylor, Hurley, & Riley, 1986), and differing ancestries (e.g., Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico), as well as the inadequacies of dependent measures (Vega, 1990).

We chose mothers living in Mexico to circumvent difficulties associated with acculturation. Also, only Caucasian mothers living in the United States were used to control for the potential variation in parenting practices across different ethnic groups within this country. Given that there are inherent problems associated with using available social indexes to compare socioeconomic levels across different countries, we decided to use maternal education as an independent variable instead. Educational requirements in Mexico and the United States are similar in that both countries require 12 years of formal education beyond the preschool and kindergarten years. Finally, we used a measure of parenting that already had proven psychometric properties in both Mexico and the United States.

With these controls in place, our general hypothesis was that parenting practices associated with raising very young children would be similar among Mexican and U.S. mothers. This hypothesis was, in part, predicated on the assumption that "there are very special and exacting constraints and demands associated with parenting very young children, and opportunistically these may be more universal than not" (Bornstein, 1991, p. 13).

**Method**

**Sample**

Participants were 69 Latina mothers from Mexico and 69 Caucasian mothers from the United States with at least one child between the ages of 1 and 5 years. Mothers with more than one child in this age range were asked to select one focus child for this project. Two independent variables were used to select the sample: family ethnicity and maternal education. Mothers in the Mexican sample had completed 6 years of elementary school, 3 years of secondary school, and 3 years of preparatory school or technical training, for a total of 12 years of formal schooling. Mothers in the U.S. sample were high school graduates and, hence, had completed an equivalent period of formal schooling (8 years of elementary and junior high school and 4 years of high school).
The Mexican sample of 69 mothers was randomly selected from a larger convenience sample of 221 mothers used in a separate parenting study (Solis-Camara & Fox, 1995). The larger convenience sample of Mexican mothers was drawn from three day care centers of the Mexican Social Security Institute and four preschools (two private, two public) located in the urban area of Guadalajara, Mexico. Guadalajara is a large, urban city with a population of approximately 5 million people. Socioeconomic status (SES) was determined by the school or day care center that the children attended. Higher SES families sent their children to schools or day care centers that were private, charged tuition fees, and were located in residential areas; lower SES families sent their children to government-supported schools or day care centers that were located in densely populated areas of the city.

The U.S. sample of 69 mothers was randomly selected from a large urban sample of 1,140 mothers (Fox, 1992). U.S. mothers’ and fathers’ employment was categorized according to Stevens and Cho's (1985) occupational classification scheme. The family’s SES was based on the higher wage earner’s occupation. For purposes of this study, two categories were used: higher SES included managerial, professional, technical, sales, and administrative support occupations; lower SES included service, farming, production, craft, operators,’ and laborers’ occupations.

Chi-square tests showed that the Mexican and U.S. samples were similar in terms of years of maternal education, SES (as separately defined for each sample), marital status, and the age and sex of the focus children (p > .05). However, the two samples differed significantly on mothers’ age (p = .012); the Mexican sample had more mothers in the older age category (up to and including 49-year-olds) and fewer mothers in the younger age category (up to and including 29-year-olds) than the U.S. sample. The average age of the focus children in the Mexican sample (M = 3.16 years, SD = 1.06) did not differ significantly from the age of the children in the U.S. sample (M = 3.25 years, SD = 1.06). The number of siblings also did not differ between the Mexican (M = 1.01, SD = 0.90) and U.S. samples (M = 0.86, SD = 0.94).

Procedures
All mothers completed a demographic form and the Parent Behavior Checklist (PBC; Fox, 1994). The PBC, a 100-item rating scale, measures parenting of young children. It consists of three subscales, empirically derived through factor analyses: The Expectations scale contains 50 items that measure parents’ developmental expectations (“My child should be able to feed him/herself”); the Discipline scale consists of 30 items that assess parental responses to children’s problem behaviors (“I yell at my child for spilling food”); and the Nurturing scale contains 20 items that measure specific parent behaviors that promote a child’s psychological growth (“I read to my child at bedtime”). The items are written at a third-grade reading level. Parents rate each item on a 4-point frequency scale (4 = almost always/always, 3 = frequently 2 = sometimes, and 1= almost never/never). Higher scores on the Expectations subscale are associated with higher parental expectations, and lower scores are associated with lower expectations. Higher scores on the Discipline subscale are associated with more frequent use of corporal and verbal punishment by parents (spanking, yelling), and lower scores are associated with less frequent use of corporal and verbal punishment. Higher scores on the Nurturing subscale suggest more frequent use of positive nurturing activities by parents (e.g., playing, reading), and lower scores suggest less frequent use of nurturing strategies.

From a representative sample of 1,140 mothers (Fox, 1992), internal consistencies (alpha) were calculated for each subscale: Expectations =.97; Discipline= .91; and Nurturing =.82. Test-retest reliabilities determined through two administrations of the PBC separated by at least 1 week were as follows: Expectations =.98; Discipline = .87; and Nurturing = .81. Developmental sensitivity of the PBC was shown by its ability to distinguish between parents with children of different ages (Fox & Bentley, 1992). In one study, responses on the PBC were not influenced by a social desirability response set (Peters & Fox, 1993).
For the Mexican sample, the PBC was initially translated into Spanish by Pedro Solis-Camara, a bilingual researcher living in Guadalajara, Mexico. Words common to the different dialects of Spanish were used. A back translation was performed by a bilingual graduate student with Puerto Rican ancestry living in the United States. The wording from the back translation was reviewed, and minor changes in the Spanish translation were made. With a sample of 221 Mexican mothers, Solis-Camara and Fox (1995) reported the following coefficient alpha values for the three PBC subscales: Expectations =.95; Discipline =.87; and Nurturing =.83. Test-retest reliabilities computed for a subsample of 49 Mexican mothers were as follows: Expectations =.96; Discipline =.88; and Nurturing =.91. The PBC was shown to be developmentally sensitive by its ability to distinguish between Mexican parents with children of different ages (i.e., the PBC's Expectation subscale successfully discriminated between mothers of 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-year-old children).

Results
To determine whether there were significant differences in parenting between the Mexican and U.S. mothers, we computed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) that included PBC Expectations, Discipline, and Nurturing scores as the three dependent variables and ethnicity as the primary independent variable. A significant effect was not found for ethnicity (p = .932). Mexican and U.S. mothers had similar mean scores on the Expectations scale (Mexican mothers, 138.6; U.S. mothers, 136.0), the Discipline scale (Mexican mothers, 46.4; U.S. mothers, 46.8), and the Nurturing scale (Mexican mothers, 59.8; U.S. mothers, 59.5).

A series of exploratory, secondary analyses were conducted to determine whether other factors influenced PBC scores. A MANOVA was computed using ethnicity and maternal age (younger vs. older) as the independent variables and the three PBC subscale scores as the dependent variables. A significant Ethnicity X Maternal Age interaction effect was found, F(3, 132) = 3.48, p = .018. Univariate F tests indicated significance for the Discipline score only (p = .002). The mean Discipline scores for the four groups were as follows: 41.5 for younger Mexican mothers, 50.0 for younger U.S. mothers, 48.0 for older Mexican mothers, and 44.2 for older U.S. mothers. There were no main effects for ethnicity or maternal age. Two separate MANOVAs computed with the three PBC scores as dependent variables and either ethnicity and SES or ethnicity and marital status as the independent variables resulted in no significant main effects or interaction effects.

To study the potential impact of the focus children's characteristics (i.e., age, sex) on PBC scores, we computed separate MANOVAs with ethnicity and child characteristics as the independent variables. For child's age (younger = less than 3 years old, older = 3-5 years old), a significant main effect was found, F(3, 132) = 53.96, p < .001. Univariate F tests indicated significance for the Expectations (p < .001) and Discipline scores (p = .001). Mothers had significantly higher expectations for older children (M = 156.1) than for younger children (M = 110.5). Also, mothers had significantly higher discipline scores for older children (M = 49.6) than for younger children (M = 42.3). There were no differences for the nurturing scores. A significant Ethnicity x Child Age interaction effect also was found, F(3, 132) = 2.87, p = .039. Univariate F tests indicated significance only for the Nurturing scores (p = .006). For younger children, the mean Nurturing scores were 60.2 for U.S. mothers and 56.9 for Mexican mothers; for older children, the mean Nurturing scores were 58.9 for U.S. mothers and 61.8 for Mexican mothers. A MANOVA with child's sex and ethnicity as the independent variables and the PBC subscale scores as the dependent variables did not produce significant main effects or interaction effects. A final MANOVA with ethnicity and number of siblings (none vs. one or more) as the independent variables and the PBC subscale scores as the dependent variables resulted in a trend toward a significant main effect for siblings, F(3, 132) = 2.28, p = .082. This trend was due to the Expectations (p = .012) and Discipline scores (p = .148). Mothers with more than one child tended to have higher Expectations (M = 141.9) and Discipline scores (M = 47.5) than mothers with only the focus child living at home (Ms = 128.1 and 44.7, respectively).
Discussion

The present study examined the parenting practices and developmental expectations in a sample of 69 Mexican mothers and 69 Caucasian mothers from the United States with young children. Mothers were selected for study because in both cultures, mothers continue to take primary responsibility for raising their young children. The Mexican and U.S. samples were matched on maternal education levels, both having completed 12 years of formal schooling beyond preschool and kindergarten. Although it could be argued that the education systems in Mexico and the United States differ significantly, maternal education was considered a better independent variable than was SES. Available SES indexes (e.g., that of Stevens & Cho, 1985) rely on U.S. occupational classification systems that are not directly applicable in Mexico. Moreover, one study of U.S. mothers (Fox, Platz, & Bentley, in press) found that maternal education may override the family’s SES in terms of influencing maternal parenting practices. The measures we used to classify family SES in each sample were different but do provide a reasonably accurate level relative to each country’s socioeconomic standards. We also used a parenting measure with proven psychometric properties in both Mexico and the United States.

The most impressive finding was that there were no significant differences between Mexican and U.S. mothers in their parenting practices with young children, including their developmental expectations, discipline styles, and nurturing strategies. This finding supports our primary hypothesis that there would be no differences in parenting practices between cultures if we carefully controlled the level of maternal education between samples. This hypothesis was based in part on the similar challenges that young children present to parents regardless of culture (Bornstein, 1991) and the resulting similar bidirectional influences (i.e., parenting practices) that result (Maccoby, 1992). This finding also is consistent with those of Laosa (1981), who reported that ethnic-group differences in maternal behavior disappeared when the schooling level attained by the mothers was controlled.

The secondary analyses of parenting practices by maternal characteristics (i.e., maternal age, marital status, family SES) produced only one significant finding. Older Mexican mothers had higher Discipline scores than younger Mexican mothers, with the reverse being the case for U.S. mothers. Whereas Diaz, Meda, and Solis-Camara (1991) also found that older Mexican mothers scored higher on a scale of corporal punishment than younger mothers, Solis-Camara and Fox (1994) found that older Mexican mothers scored lower on the PBC Discipline subscale than younger mothers. The finding that younger U.S. mothers scored higher than older U.S. mothers in their use of corporal punishment is consistent with previous research (Fox et al., in press). Considering the inconsistent findings for the Mexican mothers, additional research is needed to determine the effect of maternal age on parenting practices.

When parenting practices among U.S. and Mexican mothers were compared for older versus younger focus children, the results were in expected directions. Both samples maintained higher expectations and reported more frequent use of discipline with older children than with younger children. These findings are consistent with other studies (Fox & Bentley, 1992; Solis-Camara & Fox, 1994) and support the developmental sensitivity of the PBC across these two cultures. The finding that Mexican mothers nurtured older children at a higher frequency than younger children may be related to the type and range of nurturing activities measured by the PBC. In Mexico, nurturing children under 3 years of age typically includes showing affection (e.g., hugging, kissing) and helping the child to master developmental tasks (e.g., toileting, learning to speak). Nurturing, as defined by the PBC, does not sample these activities. A final finding of this study was a tendency for all mothers to have higher Expectation and Discipline scores when one or more siblings of the focus child also were present in the home. A similar finding has been reported elsewhere for U.S. mothers (Fox et al., in press). Clearly, with more children in the home, the less time the mother has to spend with each child. Consequently, by necessity, the mother may develop and maintain higher expectations to encourage more independence in each child. Also, mothers with more than one child may find that corporal and verbal punishment, though less desirable in the...
long term, may be more efficient in producing desired results in the short term (e.g., stopping a temper tantrum).

The findings from this comparative study of the parenting practices of Mexican and U.S. mothers are preliminary. The striking similarities found between the two cultures suggest that at least for young children, the demands of parenting are similar across cultures. Moreover, parents of similar educational backgrounds from different but similarly developed cultures (e.g., industrialized countries) may respond in similar ways to young children; this finding is consistent with a reciprocal interaction framework for understanding the socialization of young children (Maccoby, 1992). Perhaps cultural differences in parenting may become more apparent as the children mature. Also, only one instrument was used in this study, and it may not have been sensitive to possible differences between Mexican and U.S. mothers with young children. On a positive note, if continued research provides further support for the hypothesis that raising very young children is more culturally universal than culturally specific, then the education and intervention programs designed to improve early parent-child interactions in the United States also may have application in Mexico.

References


