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Latino Father Involvement in the United States

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Introduction

Latinos are the fastest growing and largest ethnic group in the United States (U.S.). According to the U.S. Census, Latinos are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2010 questionnaire ("Mexican," "Puerto Rican", or "Cuban") or of another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, including from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, or the Dominican Republic. People who identify their origin as Latino may be of any race. It is not surprising, then, that Latinos are highly diverse in country of origin, nativity, socioeconomic status (SES), and immigration experience.[1,2,3] As a group, Latinos are, on average, less educated and have lower incomes than their White counterparts.[4] However, compared to other minority men of similar income and education, Latino fathers are more likely to be resident.[5] Despite the rapid rise in nonmarital births among Latinos,[6] most of these births are to parents who live together (cohabiting). That is, most Latino children live in households where fathers are accessible and share in their daily care.[7] In spite of the demographic risks, Latino children also experience protective factors (two-parent households). Thus, examining the role of Latino fathers in children's lives requires understanding both risk and resilience processes.

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Subject

There is indisputable evidence that economic and social disadvantage are linked with suboptimal developmental outcomes.[8,9] However, much of this literature does not consider the variability in children's functioning within poor and ethnic minority children. One protective factor that is key in early childhood is positive father involvement.[10,11] While there are multiple influences on a young child's development, parents, including fathers, are the most proximal and important influence on children and can directly and indirectly affect their development.[12] Aspects of positive father involvement beneficial for children include warm, responsive, and sensitive interactions, literacy support, and appropriate control.[13,14,15,16] In addition, research has identified culturally specific beliefs (e.g., strong family values) and practices (e.g., meal times) that promote social, behavioural and emotional regulation, and linguistic development in their children.

The Research Context

Overall, the body of research on Latino families and children has focused on Mexican American samples, the largest Latino group in the U.S., or on Latino samples more globally without specifying country of origin. When researchers examine within group differences, findings show striking variability in cultural beliefs and values, SES, father residence and involvement, and, consequently children's developmental outcomes.[17,18] Because most of the research is not theoretically framed and has focused on low-income samples of convenience, it does not always disentangle the effects of SES from ethnicity. Thus conclusions tend to be overstated, confounding SES and ethnicity, and obscuring variability. With this caveat, most of the findings reported here are based on Latinos as a group and do not explore variability by SES or nativity status that might influence results.

Key Research Questions, Findings, and Gaps

Studies of Latino father involvement often address the following questions[19]: (1) How are Latino fathers involved in their children's lives? (2) What factors explain variability in father involvement among Latino fathers? And (3) How is Latino father involvement linked with their children's development?

1) How are Latino fathers involved in their children's lives?

There are several ways to answer the question. The first step is to determine the frequency of father involvement. National data show that contemporary fathers are more hands-on than they were in previous decades and, consequently, more involved in the daily care of their children.[20] For example, U.S. Census Bureau[3] data reveal high levels of fathers' shared book reading of children between ages 1 and 5 years. Similarly, among Latinos, national data show that compared to White fathers, Latino fathers are more involved in physical play (e.g., peek-a-boo).[21]

Second, researchers often compare mothers to fathers to gauge the degree of father involvement. While mothers and fathers share similar roles, research focused on mothers and fathers does not acknowledge that there are also differences. Based on reviews of the literature, the emerging thinking is that mothers and fathers are similar in some ways, different in others, and that for some domains their contribution might be complementary.[22] Both parents have been observed to engage in sensitive and stimulating interactions with their children.[13] Reported differences often reflect differing levels of intensity of engagement rather than type. Fathers, including Latinos, are more likely to engage in physical play and encourage risk-taking than mothers,[23,24] and use higher quality language in interactions with their children than mothers.[25,26,27] These differences, however, also show that mothers and fathers make unique contributions to their children's development, over and above the influence of the other parent. Research investigating complementary (interaction effects) is just emerging and it shows that these effects might be domain specific (e.g., father caregiving can buffer the negative effect of maternal depression on infant distress).[28]

Third, researchers often compare involvement of Latino fathers to involvement of other ethnic minority or majority groups.[29] When compared to White or other ethnic minority fathers, Latino mothers report that their children's fathers are highly engaged (i.e., accessible, engaged, and responsible) with their children, spending, on average, more than one hour more with them (ages birth to 12 years) during the weekend, and engaging in more responsibility activities (i.e., care-giving, discipline, decision making).[29,30,31,32]

2) What factors explain variability in father involvement among Latino fathers?

Researchers have focused on demographic characteristics to understand variability in father involvement. Men's education and income are strong predictors of father involvement,[33] although may be less important among Latino men. A study found that Mexican American fathers' education was not associated with father involvement.[34] Perhaps there was not sufficient

variability to capture any influence of education on fathers. This finding could also signify that cultural expectations of what it means to be a good dad may trump education. Another demographic factor consistently linked to father involvement is father residence.[35,36,37] Compared to nonresident fathers, resident fathers have more access to their children on a daily basis.

The quality of the couple relationship (e.g., romantic, co-parenting) also supports father involvement among Latinos.[31] Latino fathers who report lower levels of co-parenting conflict are more engaged in caregiving and reported less negative parenting than fathers reporting higher levels of co-parenting conflict.[38] A study concluded that differences in type of father engagement between Mexican American and other Latinos (e.g., Puerto Rican, Cuban) were attributed to couple relationship quality (controlling for SES and acculturation).[39] This is also true for Latino mothers; the quality of the relationship with their partners is an important predictor of their own involvement.[32]

Research on Latino parenting has also highlighted the importance of cultural values, such as familism, defined as valuing family solidarity and family integration.[40,41] On average, Latinos have been found to report higher levels of familism compared to individuals of other ethnic groups.[42] A growing correlational body of work shows Mexican American fathers who hold high familism values (i.e., family rituals) report being more involved (monitoring, interacting) with their children than fathers with lower familism values.[34]

Cultural beliefs about gender roles and division of labor within the family also seem to be related to positive parenting. Fathers who hold less traditional gender roles (i.e., men are not more integral to society and the family than women) are more involved in all aspects of parenting (e.g., monitoring, supervising) than fathers who hold more traditional beliefs.[34]

3) How is Latino father involvement linked with their children's development?

Research that examines specifically how Latino fathers' involvement and investment in their children benefit children is consistent with general findings on parenting, which are mostly based on mothers. Research specifically on Latino fathers may also offer important insights into culturally specific practices that may promote children's positive development.

Based on investment theories, fathers' income and education are linked to better children's cognitive and social outcomes. These effects seem to be both direct and indirect through its influence on the quality of home experiences parents provide for their children, especially

mother-child interactions.[43] These findings should hold for both resident and nonresident fathers. Children who live with both biological parents have higher levels of academic achievement, get more schooling, have better behavioral outcomes, are less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviors, and are more likely to have friends.[31] Although less tested, evidence shows that nonresident fathers' resources may also operate in the same way to influence their children's development.[44] It is important to highlight that these findings have not examined whether the pathway from parents' resources to children's outcomes is also channeled through father-child interactions. Although evidence shows that fathers engage in age-appropriate sensitive interactions with their children, it is unclear whether this explains the association between parents' resources and children's outcomes.[13,23,45,46,47]

In addition to fathers' human capital, there is also evidence that cultural values and beliefs might be directly and indirectly, through increased father involvement, associated with children's psychosocial functioning. For instance, optimism – positive expectation for the future[48] – and familism may be particularly important characteristics of Latino parents that contribute to their children's socioemotional development.[49,50] A study found that Mexican American mothers' and fathers' own reports of optimism were directly and concurrently associated with their teen's peer competence.[51] Similarly, Latino mothers and fathers who highly believe that familism is important have children who exhibit good psychosocial functioning (social problem solving skills, social self-efficacy),[41,52,53,54] have fewer depressive symptoms and are more engaged in school.[55]

Implications

The growing body of research on Latino fathers suggests that, on average, they are highly involved with and responsible for their children. This relatively high level of involvement is beneficial for children's positive social, behavioural and emotional regulation, and linguistic development. Additionally, Latino families' cultural values about the importance of the family and a general sense of optimism are implicated in important ways in how involved fathers are with their children and, in turn, children's wellbeing. A finding worth repeating is that more Latino fathers, unlike other minority fathers, live with their children and partners. Being resident and accessible to their children can protect them from the negative effects that economic adversity, prevalent in single parent households, can have on family functioning. Moreover, two-parent families are more able to provide support and stability than single-household families. The focus on two-parent families among Latinos also highlights the importance of the relationship quality to family functioning.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that Latino children live in impoverished environments that place them at risk for poor school performance, high school dropout, and psychosocial maladjustment.[56] Although Latino children tend to exhibit high social skills and live with two parents, which are strengths, their academic problems in school begin early and are largely related to living in economic disadvantage.[39,57] In this context, positive Latino fathers' involvement has the potential to protect children from the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on their development, but it is not a panacea. Policies and programs should not discount the importance of an involved father, but should also consider the demographic context of Latino families in the US. Understanding the sources of resilience (involved father) and risk (poverty) in Latino children's wellbeing will strengthen efforts to improve their lives.

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