An Exploratory Study of Parenting Dimensions and Family Conflict among Head Start Participants: An Examination of Hispanic Mothers

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Abstract

Understanding the dynamics of the relationship between family conflict and parenting is important to human service practice. When assisting clients, human service practitioners must address many different systems including culture, historical era, ethnicity, gender, and other systems in which the individual operates (Martin, 2013). This study explores this phenomenon by examining the relationship between family conflict and the six dimensions of parenting; warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support, and coercion among Hispanic mothers who access an inner city Head Start program. Findings are discussed in terms of cultural impact, human service practice and the need for further research.

Introduction

Few studies exist that investigate parenting dimensions and family conflict among Hispanic mothers. However, scholarly research literature has illuminated many of the problems associated with conflict in the family structure, which impact human service practice. Human service professionals work in a variety of settings assisting families and children. These settings include state family service agencies and not for profit agencies providing family crisis services, case management, counseling, and advocacy services to clients (Martin, 2013). Understanding the role of conflict and its relationship with parenting is important to human service professionals working in these settings. Conflict within the family structure resulted in negative outcomes (Burns & Dunlap, 2002; Hannum & Dvorak, 2004; Schralch, Li, & Dalvi, 2006; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Empirical investigations indicate that parenting dimensions are important factors related to emotional stability, development, and decision-making characteristics of children (Buehler, Benson, & Gerard, 2006).

Skinner's six dimensions of parenting are; warmth, autonomy support, structure, chaos, rejection, and coercion (Skinner, Johnson & Snyder, 2005). Parenting dimensions play an important role in the family unit and in the development of children (Buehler et al., 2006; Cox, 2006; Manongdo, 2010). Most studies that examine parenting dimensions focus on two of the six dimensions; warmth and demandingness/coercion (Rodriguez, Donovick, & Crowley, 2009). Although much of the research conducted surrounded the influence of parenting styles and family conflict on children (Juang & Alvarez, 2010; McKelvey et al., 2010; Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben, & VonKlitzing, 2010), and fewer studies investigated the influence of parenting dimensions and family conflict in general (Randolph, & Kuvalanka, 2006; Schoppe-Sullivan, Schermerhorn & Cummings,

2007; O'Donnell, Cardemil, Moreau, & Pollastri, 2007), there are no known empirical research studies that have explored the relationship between parenting dimensions and family conflict among Hispanic mothers who have children enrolled in inner city Head Start programs. Exploring this relationship can lend insight beneficial to human service practice and future research initiatives.

Empirical investigations suggest that conflict is detrimental to the healthy functioning of the family unit. Stadelman et al. (2010) found that family conflict results in increased negative emotional symptoms. Studies also suggest that depression and anxiety is the result of conflict within the family unit (McKelvey et al., 2010; Tanaka, Raishevich, & Scarpa, 2010). Furthermore, conflict can exacerbate other family issues (Juang & Alvarez, 2010), such as poor communication (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), physical health (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002), and psychological insecurity (Hannum & Dvorak, 2004). In fact, Burns and Dunlop (2002) suggested the intensity level and degree of conflict experienced in early adolescence influenced the construction and development of self-image and contributed to the onset of anxiety. Finally, Santiago and Wadsworth (2008) contend family conflict is related to internalizing symptoms and high stress in impoverished families.

Much of the research that encompasses conflict within the family and aspects of parenting results in significant findings. Negative parenting influences family conflict (Horwitz, 2011) and family conflict influences parenting abilities (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Additionally, research confirmed that family conflict led to parenting dysphoria (Du Rocher et al., 2007), ineffective parenting (Buehler & Gerard, 2002), and interferes with constructs of co-parenting (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Furthermore, research suggests relationships exist between parenting dimensions and interparental conflict (O'Donnell, Cardemil, Moreau, & Pollastri, 2007) as well as between marital conflict (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007). However, specifics of this relationship are not defined. Therefore, specifics of characteristics of parenting dimensions that relate to family conflict have not been determined, but aspects that relate to the relationship have been explored. Although research uncovers many of the serious consequences of conflict for the family unit and children within the family structure (Burns & Dunlap, 2002; Juang & Alvarez, 2010; McKelvey et al., 2010; Santiago & Wadsworth, 2008; Tanaka et al., 2010), the six dimensions of parenting are not linked to conflict within the family structure. As a result, this study explores the relationship between parenting dimensions and family conflict among Hispanic mothers in an attempt to add to the body of knowledge on this topic.

A gap exists in literature regarding parenting dimensions and family conflict among Hispanic mothers. This exploratory study adds to the body of knowledge by specifically examining if a relationship exists between family conflict and all six dimensions of parenting. The contributions of the study are important to human service practice and research because it explores parenting in manner not previously done, viewing all six parenting dimensions in relation to family conflict. This study is unique in its population focus, which includes

Hispanic mothers who access inner-city Head Start programs. Community programs such as Head Start typically have a focus on family development, which includes addressing issues of parenting and strengthening parenting (Department of Human Service, 2009). Human service practitioners play an important role within these programs, servicing families as brokers, evaluators, caregivers, educators, and administrators. This study lends information that can assist human service practitioners in their work with Hispanic mothers, as well as provides a platform for further research on this population.

Method

According to Bordens and Abbott (2008), quantitative research with a correlation methodology is suitable for this study because it effectively determines whether a relationship exists between the six dimensions of parenting and family conflict. This study sought to explore the relationship between family conflict and Skinner's six dimensions of parenting which are noted as: warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support, and coercion among Hispanic mothers (Skinner et al., 2005).

Instrument

The instruments used for this study were designed to measure the variables of family conflict and parenting dimensions. This study utilized [The] Parent as Social Context Questionnaire (PASCQ) that measured parenting dimensions of warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support, and coercion (Skinner et al., 2005), [The] Conflict Subscale of the Family Environment Scale R (FES; 3rd Edition) that measured family conflict, and demographics questioning to assess the sample population. Family Environment Scale is commonly used in the field of human services among ethnically diverse populations. In fact, it has been used among Head Start participants in previous research efforts (Moos & Moos, 2002). However, until this study the Parent as Social Context Scale has not been assessed among ethnically diverse populations, but has been used among both mothers and fathers (Skinner et al., 2005). Surveys included 30 questions that measured parenting dimension, 9 questions that measured present state of family conflict, and 6 demographic questions that measured employment, education, marital status, ethnicity, gender and age. Surveys were made available in both English and Spanish, with Spanish speaking interpreters on-site to address language barriers. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Participants received a five dollar gift card for their participation in the study.

Sample

Cluster sampling was employed in which participants were selected based on their participation in the Head Start program. Head Start is a preschool program for families who meet the federal income poverty guidelines as a requirement of the program. Head Start is a complex program whose services were designed to focus

on the family as a whole (Department of Human Service, 2009). It is a family-centered program reflecting the philosophy that parents are the principal influence on their children's development. Head Start was developed as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty Initiative (Department of Human Service, 2009). It was designed to break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool to low-income families. Head Start seeks to meet the emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs of children. Ninety percent of participants must meet the government poverty standards to be a part of the program (Department of Human Service, 2009). Positive outcomes for children and parents have been associated with involvement in Head Start (Love et al., 2005). Due to the parenting and family focus of Head Start and its stance within the community, mothers were sampled from this population. The agency had an enrollment of 1,472 children and approximately 67.5% of the children in this agency were of Hispanic or Latino origin (Association for Children and Families, 2010). Nine hundred eighty six mothers were targeted for participation in the study. Participants consisted of 55 mothers who self-identified as Hispanic yielding a response rate of approximately 5.6%. Participants were between the ages of 18-48 with children currently enrolled in Head Start in a large city in an East North Central State. A majority of participants were married, employed, and had at least one year of college. The sample did not include fathers or non-biological families. Participants took hand written surveys at their local Head Start site as scheduled times during regular school hours; and informed consent was obtained prior to administration.

Data Analysis

Correlation analysis was used to determine if any statistically significant relationships existed among variables. A survey of Hispanic populations was used to collect data on demographics, parenting dimensions, and family conflict. Data was organized and coded based on the survey directions for coding. [The] Parent as Social Context Questionnaire (PASCQ) interval data was generated in a four-point format. Questions 1-5 on were summed to create a measure of warmth/involvement. Questions 6-10 were summed to create a measure of rejection. Questions 11-15 were summed to create a measure of structure. Questions 16-20 were summed to create a measure of chaos. Questions 21-25 were summed to create a measure of autonomy support. Questions 26-30 were summed to create a measure of coercion (Skinner et al., 2005). The raw data, once coded, was entered into SPSS.

Conflict subscale data from [The] Family Environment Scale Form R (FES; 3rd edition) was coded in a two-point format. The type of data generated from each item was ordinal and could be treated as interval data. Response categories were "true" or "false," and the responses were summed in terms of the number of true and the number of false in each column. The raw scores were generated from these responses (Moos & Moos, 2002).

Findings

There was no significant relationship between family conflict and warmth amongst Hispanic mothers, r = -.151, N = 55, p = .270, two-tails. There was, however, a significant, positive relationship between family conflict and rejection amongst Hispanic mothers, r = .374, N = 55, p = .005, two-tails. As rejection increased, there was a corresponding increase in family conflict. Although there was no significant relationship between family conflict and structure amongst Hispanic mothers, r = -.026, N = 55, p = .853, two-tails, there was a significant, positive relationship between family conflict and chaos amongst Hispanic mothers, r = .438, N = 55, p = .001, two-tails. Again, as chaos increased, there was a corresponding increase in family conflict. There was no significant relationship found between family conflict and autonomy support among Hispanic mothers, r = -.071, N = 55, p = .605, two-tails, and no significant relationship between family conflict and coercion amongst Hispanic mothers, r = .064, N = 55, p = .643, two-tails.

There was a significant, positive relationship between family conflict and rejection amongst Hispanic mothers, r = .374, N = 55, p = .005, two-tails; as rejection increased, there was a corresponding increase in family conflict. This is illustrated in Figure 1. The coefficient of determination (r2) = .14, which means that 14% of the variance in family conflict among Hispanic mothers can be explained by rejection.

There was no significant relationship between family conflict and structure amongst Hispanic mothers, r = -.026, N = 55, p = .853, two-tails. There was a significant, positive relationship between family conflict and chaos amongst Hispanic mothers, r = .438, N = 55, p = .001, two-tails. As chaos increased, there was a corresponding increase in family conflict. This is illustrated in Figure 2. The coefficient of determination (r2) = .19, which means that 19% of the variance in family conflict among Hispanic mothers can be explained by chaos.

There was no significant relationship between family conflict and autonomy support, r = -.071, N = 55, p = .605, two-tails, or between family conflict and coercion, r = .064, N = 55, p = .643, two-tails. Significant relationships were found between family conflict and chaos as well as family conflict and rejection among Hispanic mothers. Since two out of six relationships examined were statistically significant, H1 is supported and the null hypothesis rejected.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that a relationship exists between parenting dimensions and family conflict in Hispanic mothers who accessed inner city Head Start programs. The findings partially confirm this hypothesis by noting the significant relationships that exist between family conflict and the parenting dimensions of rejection and chaos. As rejection and chaos increase family conflict also increases. For the purposes of this study, rejection is defined as active dislike, aversion, and is often referred to as hostility within the instrument used to measure rejection (Skinner et al., 2005). Family conflict is characterized by the amount of openly

expressed anger and conflict within the family defined by the instrument used to measure family conflict (Moos & Moos, 2002). The relationship found between rejection and family conflict is consistent with seminal research. Skinner et al. (2005) states, "Expressions of rejection include aversion, hostility, harshness, over reactivity, irritability, and explosiveness; they also include overt communication of negative feelings for the child, such as criticism, derision, and disapproval" (p.185). Additionally, Horwitz et al. (2011) includes hostility, anger, and aggression in their definition of family conflict. Furthermore, previous research efforts noted that any conflict that arises within the family is deemed family conflict (Ali, 2010). Rejection contributes to family conflict due to its aggressive characteristics. Research has posited that rejection mediates the relationship between inter-parental conflict and depression, which supports the findings of this study by determining a relationship, existed between rejection and conflict in previous studies (O'Donnell et al., 2007).

Chaos was also found to have a significant relationship with family conflict among Hispanic mothers in this study. It is characteristic of an environment that is confused and disorganized (Skinner et al., 2005). A review of the literature has supported this by noting that family conflict impacts parenting by leading to parenting dysphoria (Du Rocher et al., 2007), ineffective parenting (Buehler & Gerard, 2002), and impedes co-parenting (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Furthermore, the relationships between the conflict and the parenting dimensions of chaos and rejection implies that less favorable aspects of parenting relate to the presence of family conflict. Similar studies have found that parenting dimensions relate to conflict within the family in terms of inter-parental conflict and marital conflict (O'Donnell et al., 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007). The findings of this study support previous research efforts, which have noted that relationships exist between parenting and family conflict.

  Previous research efforts have concluded that rejection mediates conflict and depression (O'Donnell et al., 2007). Furthermore, rejection and chaos are noted as negative dimensions of parenting (Skinner et al., 2005). This study contends that as rejection and chaos increase, family conflict increases. It can be determined from this result that minimizing rejection and chaos among Hispanic mothers can minimize the presence of family conflict.

Limitations

        The generalizability of the findings is limited due to the limited scope of the study. The limitations of the study include the surveying of mothers only, the lack of inclusion of biracial families, the lack of inclusion of nontraditional families (i.e. grandparent heads of households, foster families, and blended families), and a small sample size. The use of cluster sampling allowed access to the population but also limited the presence of both mothers and fathers. Mothers were included in this study because of their visibility and the possibility of unequal participation of fathers. Biological mothers were the focus of this study because nontraditional

families may differ in results and should be researched independently. The focus of this study was Hispanic mothers. Biracial mothers may not identify with one race and should be researched independently due to the possibility of differences in results. Furthermore, the small sample size and use of cluster sampling impacts the generalizability of the findings. The inclusion of the variables discussed in the limitations noted above may enhance the quality of the results.

Implications for Human Service Practice

The findings of this study may have implications for practice, specifically practice with Head Start Hispanic mothers. The first implication is that human service practitioners should be aware of cultural diversity in parenting and how it influences the family system. Human services is constantly evolving and adjusting to societal changes. Human service practitioners are charged with a role of reunifying, supporting and strengthen families. The role of the human service practitioners includes meeting the needs of clients despite change. However, the practitioners must be aware of changes and differences based on culture. Research contends that in practice practitioners must partner with clients and not assume they understand a client's cultural background or experience (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). This study sheds light on the cultural differences found in the parenting of Hispanic mothers as well as how these differences relate to conflict within the family. Human service professionals must become ethically astute cross-cultural helpers that have left their bias behind and are knowledgeable about cultural and ethnic differences (Neukrug, 2012). Human service professionals must be sensitive to client needs, and cultural humility and awareness are a part of the development process that fosters a strong working alliance (Hook et al., 2013). Human services practitioners can benefit from the findings in this study because it explores a minority population and the social values that influence this population (e.g., parenting and conflict).

The second implication of this study is that human service practitioners should be aware of those parenting traits that specifically relate to family conflict. This study explores a relationship between family conflict and the parenting dimensions of chaos and rejection. Further understanding of this relationship can assist practitioners in their service to Hispanic mothers. Family conflict is associated with negative parenting dimensions. Human service practitioners charged with reunifying and strengthening families can utilize this study to guide the process of reunification and removing barriers. Practice should focus on recognizing and limiting parenting dimensions of chaos and rejection. Human service practitioners should be aware of the many forms of family conflict and the relationship it has with parenting and overall family functioning.

The third implication of this study is providing a basis for human service practitioners to develop programming. Programming should focus on teaching families to recognize family conflict and building positive parenting dimensions. Practitioners within their work with Hispanic mothers should focus on developing positive parenting dimensions in an effort to minimize conflict with in the family.

This type of programming can aid practitioners in reunifying conflicted families. This study provides a baseline for further research and contributes insight that can be used in human service practice. This study explores Hispanic mothers who access inner city Head Start programs, and it can assist human service practitioners in understanding the need for further educating themselves on this population. Though the scope of this study is small, it may be representative of the parenting practices and family conflict of inner-city Head Start Hispanic mothers. This study explores a topic relevant to the field and utilizes quantitative methods to provide results that explore and lend to the understanding of parenting dimensions and family conflict.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study shed light on the relationships that exist between parenting dimensions and family conflict. It further explored these relationships in context of Hispanic mothers who access inner city Head Start programs. However, this exploration was limited in scope. Further research is suggested to determine the strength and nature of the relationship between family conflict and parenting dimensions. Future research should focus on expanding the generalizability of this study by including random sampling design, larger sampling size to enhance the quality of results and to extend beyond Head Start. Future research should focus on the perspectives of both parents by including fathers. In addition, future research on nontraditional families, (e.g., blended, same-sex, grandparent heads of households, and foster families) could shed light on the differences that exist among these families versus biological families in terms of family conflict and parenting dimensions. Further research in these areas would benefit human service practice.

Human service professionals are faced with servicing cultures that are consistently changing. Research provides insight on various cultures and helps to develop knowledge and understanding in human service professionals. Insight on ethnically diverse populations supports the helping professional relationships in the field of human services. This study added to the insight of practitioners by exploring relationships between family conflict and parenting dimensions, determining whether relationships existed and identifying differences. However, future research is needed to enhance the quality of the results and deepen the understanding of minority populations, which would be a benefit to the human service field.

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