Mexican American Mothers’ Romantic Relationship Quality and Toddlers’ Social Competence and Behavior Problems
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**Background**

- The Mexican-American population is not well represented in current family research. The percentage of Mexican origin families living in poverty is nearly twice the rate of the general U.S. population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). At the same time, economically disadvantaged Mexican-American children are particularly likely to reside in two-parent households (Landale & Oroposa, 2007). Family-based intervention programs for Mexican-American mothers and young children may need to consider the impact of mothers’ romantic relationships on maternal and child well-being. High-quality marital relationships may represent an important protective factor for young children.

- Mothers’ positive romantic relationship quality can have an overall positive effect on family functioning (Kittmann, 2000). It can influence children directly, by having a positive impact on children’s social development and behavior (Fishman & Meyers, 2000). It can also influence children indirectly by “spilling over” in to the parent-child relationship (Fauber et al., 1990). Process oriented models (Cummings & Davies, 2002) demonstrate the pathways by which this spill over occurs; positive relationship quality increases positive parenting behaviors, while reducing negative parenting behaviors, facilitating healthy child outcomes.

- In a community sample of Mexican American mothers with typically developing toddlers, we used path analyses (AMOS 18.0) to examine the association between mothers’ relationship quality and two child outcomes: 1) behavior problems and 2) social competence, and the possible mediating roles of both nurturing and negative parenting behaviors.

**Methods**

- Procedure: Mothers were recruited through flyers and announcements at community agencies and events. Participants met with an interviewer and provided answers to a questionnaire packet (English or Spanish available). All measures are mother-report.

- Sample: N=70. Mother age M=30.64 (SD=6.64), Child age M=27.62mo (SD=3.74), Yearly income (per capita) M= $6,627.78 (SD=5696.77). High school/GED or higher: 77%. Married/Cohabiting: 81%. Born in US: 40%

- Relationship Quality: Dyadic Adjustment Scale (α=.81). Higher scores indicate better relationship quality between mother and her partner.

- Behavior Problems: Checklist (externalizing subscale, α=.90 and internalizing subscale, α=.80). Scores from both scales were summed and the mean score was calculated for total behavior problems. Higher scores indicate more child behavior problems.

- Social Competence: Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation Scale (social competence subscale, α=.71). Higher scores indicate a greater degree of social competence by the child.

- Nurturing Parenting: Parent Behavior Checklist (nurturing subscale; α=.74). Higher scores indicate the use of more sensitive parenting behaviors.

- Negative Parenting: Parent Behavior Checklist (discipline subscale; α=.76). Higher scores indicate the use of more harsh, negative parenting behaviors.

**Results**

- Negative Parenting Model:
  - Better relationship quality is directly associated with a greater degree of social competence.
  - The influence of relationship quality on behavior problems is mediated by negative parenting.
  - Evidence of full mediation: Including negative parenting in the model reduced the association of relationship quality and behavior problems from β = -.25, p<.05, to -.17, p=.13.
  - Significance of indirect effect: Bootstrapping 95% CI [-.244, -.029]

**Discussion**

- Results indicate overall significant model fit for both models. In the negative parenting model, the association between relationship quality and behavior problems is mediated by negative parenting behaviors. Relationships quality is indirectly related to behavior problems, providing evidence of “spill over” from the romantic relationship to negative parenting behaviors. Mothers’ poor relationship quality is associated with increases in harsh, negative parenting behaviors, which are then associated with more behavior problems in children.

- A spill over effect is not evident in the association between relationship quality and social competence; better relationship quality was directly associated with a higher degree of social competence in children.

- In the nurturing parenting model, better relationship quality is directly associated with both a greater degree of social competence and fewer behavior problems in children. There is no evidence of spill over from the romantic relationship to nurturing parenting behaviors.

**Implications**

- In this sample of Mexican American mothers with toddlers, romantic relationship quality is directly related to children’s social competence (and is not mediated by parenting behaviors). Romantic relationship quality is directly related to child behavior problems, and this association is mediated by negative parenting only. That is, poor quality relationships increase negative parenting, but high quality relationships do not increase nurturing parenting; thus only negative aspects spill over to other negative aspects.

- Family-based intervention programs that serve young children may benefit from targeting the mothers’ romantic relationships as a source of family support, and provide services that facilitate healthy romantic relationships. Quality romantic relationships likely serve as positive social models to children, while poor quality romantic relationships likely serve as poor social models to children.

- Additionally, poor relationship quality undermines mothers’ parenting by increasing negative parenting behaviors. Interventions that aim to reduce harsh, negative parenting may also want to examine the quality of the mothers’ romantic relationship, as this appears to be an important mechanism in facilitating parenting behaviors that undermine children’s development.

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