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Complex Inequality: A Contextual Parenting Framework for Latino Infants

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1. Introduction

Parenting is a task that every group of people in the world engage in to promote the growth and development of their children into adults who are able to function in their environments. Parenting behaviors are seen as developmentally specific and critically important. Large gaps exist in the research on how, as academics and practitioners, we understand, capture, and translate the diverse cultural beliefs and the real life environmental experiences of Latinos, whose children now comprise 32% of U.S. residents 5 years and younger (Fry & Passel, 2009). Since parenting is the key interest in infant and early childhood mental health, social welfare researchers and practitioners must better understand the effects that culture and environment have on parenting practices of this population.

1.1. Background

Early childhood is characterized by dependence on caregivers for food, shelter, and nurturance (Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003). Young children rely on the adults in their environments to shield them from adverse circumstances or negative environmental exposures. Through the parent-child relationship, the parent buffers the child and provides a framework for the child to interpret and experience external pressures (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). This relationship becomes a central risk or protective factor, depending on the strength and quality of the bond. The quality of this relationship is multidimensional, affected by caregiver factors (e.g., parent mental health, level of parenting skill) and child factors (e.g., temperament; Halfon, Larson, & Russ, 2010; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Because of their developmental vulnerability and dependency on caregivers, social disparities are more likely to have an effect on young children, which leads to increased risk across a spectrum of health indicators including social, emotional, medical, and dental health (Halfon et al., 2010).

Significant evidence exists supporting the alarming extent to which, broadly, Latino children are confronted with social disparities as they grow and develop, including high rates of

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poverty (Lopez & Velasco, 2011), poor access to medical care (Flores & Tomany-Korman, 2008), disparate health outcomes (Vega, Rodriguez, & Gruskin, 2009), and significant educational disparities (Fuller & Kim, 2011b). However, a large portion of what we know about these disparities is based on research lacking in information about within group differences. These disparities may be compounded by a variety of other factors such as level of English language proficiency, documentation status, and geographic location. While young Latino children are largely U.S.-born, a little under half have at least one parent who is foreign born, many of whom are likely undocumented (Fry & Passel, 2009). Formal and informal support systems available initially for immigrating families can be further influenced by whether families migrate to geographic locations that have established ethnic enclaves (such as California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas) compared to states with less developed supportive infrastructure (such as Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and North Carolina; Massey & Capoferro, 2008).

Population projections show continuing increases of young Latino children in particular over the next decade (Child Trends, 2012). Over the past 20 years, the percentage of Latino children under the age of 18 years in the U.S. has grown from 9% to 23% (Child Trends, 2012). Latinos now account for 80% of the U.S. population gain of children birth to 19 years old, with the largest concentration of growth between birth and 5 years old (Fry & Passel, 2009; Johnson & Lichter, 2010). Despite current and projected demographic trends regarding the growth in Latino families with young children and documented exposure to significant social and health disparities, little is known about parenting support needs for these families.

Culturally informed, theoretically driven frameworks for supporting parenting in Latino communities are insufficiently represented in the parenting literature. To effectively support and engage these families it is necessary to have a complex understanding of the unique factors influencing nurturing parenting to inform intervention and prevention efforts in culturally responsive ways. For families with young children, this framework must be presented within a developmental and cultural context due to distinct parenting needs that exist for young children at different developmental stages (Combs-Orme et al., 2003). Latinos in the U.S. encounter multilevel factors, from the impact of their physical environments on family functioning and well-being, to the resources they have at their disposal. A culturally and contextually sensitive parenting framework must be responsive to traditional cultural beliefs and acculturative effects, as well as availability and accessibility of support systems and resources.

1.2 Purpose: Latino Parenting Framework

The concept of parenting is culturally constructed and environmentally influenced. Drawing on literature from multiple disciplines, I present herein a framework for understanding the contextual factors for consideration when working with Latino families with young children. Within this framework, I hypothesize that the environment, consisting of both physical environment (e.g., neighborhood, community) and social opportunities that are available within that environment (e.g., employment, availability and accessibility of support resources) influence parenting strategies/behaviors. Institutional and structural inequalities

often determine the conditions under which Latino families come to be in the U.S. and what environmental settings they experience. Furthermore, cultural beliefs around family and child-rearing values influence parenting decisions. I first examine the relationship between culture, environment, and parenting using an environmental risk framework. Domains of cultural variation within the Latino community are then examined, followed by an overview of the social and environmental challenges Latino families face in the U.S. Using this framework, I then evaluate how these factors may be experienced by a particularly vulnerable group of Latino parents – those at risk for involvement with or already engaged in the child welfare system. For this group of parents, how their parenting behaviors are interpreted and evaluated by practitioners in the system have serious consequences. These parents' actions are often under a microscope, leading sometimes to temporary removal of children from their homes or termination of parental rights altogether.

My intention herein is to illustrate the rich heterogeneity of the Latino community, highlighting the importance of a nuanced approach with these families because of their vast cultural and contextual diversity. A better understanding of the cultural and environmental experiences and histories and the unique parenting needs from an emic perspective has great value as researchers seek effective parenting and mental health interventions with this population. An emic focus positions research and theory-building as emerging from the population of interest instead of from an etic focus - the more traditional, researcher-driven approach, that positions research through their own theoretical framework and world view (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010; Zayas & Rojas-Flores, 2002). Viewing Latino families in this manner further helps to shape efforts in the meaningful conceptualization and sustainable implementation of interventions with implications for improving Latino child mental health outcomes and narrowing the health disparities gap for this population.

2. Culture, environment, and parenting – Reciprocal processes

Parenting practices are widely recognized as being culturally constructed. Parents adapt their practices to take account of their environmental circumstances. Child rearing, and the beliefs that guide parents, differ from culture to culture, and cultures vary in what child attributes they value and subsequently elicit, reward, and encourage. For example, research finds that among families of Mexican and Dominican origin, values of respect and obedience are more likely to be encouraged over Western values of assertiveness and autonomy (Calzada et al., 2010). Given the variation in parenting behaviors across and within cultural groups, a spectrum of parenting and family interactions seems probable. Thus, a framework for parenting beliefs and practices needs flexibility to account for the influence of family history, culture, and environmental context.

The framework presented in this paper draws from an ecological environmental risk framework originally proposed by Quinlan and Quinlan (2007), who used a life-history approach to understand how environmental risk over time transforms a family's cultural beliefs. These authors suggest that when parents perceive environmental risk, regardless of their prior beliefs, they will alter their parenting approach to place their children on a trajectory to gain tools that support survival. Cultural values and parenting strategies that do

not support survival might be altered, whereas values and behaviors that remain protective within the presence of environmental risk would be sustained.

The acculturative process significantly influences parenting strategies/behaviors and the capacity for the framework proposed here to capture shifting parenting strategies and cultural values as a function of environmental risk is particularly relevant for Latino families in the U.S. since many of them face challenging circumstances and environmental conditions. Because Latino immigrants range broadly in level of acculturation, parents often present a spectrum of parenting strategies and the diverse cultural values supporting them. This framework suggests that these variations reflect the complex and reciprocal relationship between parenting, environment, and culture, with variables within each category requiring attention.

An example of the ecological environmental risk framework can be seen in Reese's (2002) study of parenting beliefs and values for Mexican immigrants raising children in the U.S. In a longitudinal study exploring literacy development in children between 1989 and 1998, the study compared Mexican immigrant families with those of their siblings who were raising children in Mexico. Through ethnographic inquiry, shared parenting values were identified between the two groups such as *respeto* (obedience to and respect for parents and elders), *familismo* (family unity), and *buenos modelos* (referring to fundamentally, morally driven "correct" behavior). Parents emphasized they felt it was their role to teach their children *el buen camino* (the good path) so children could be raised with a solid understanding of right and wrong (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995).¹

Reese (2002) found that the families raising children in the U.S. predominantly lived in working-class neighborhoods. These parents described their neighborhoods as dangerous, with high levels of gang activity. They reported that they worked hard to keep their children away from bad peers and other influences that undermined their family values. Parents limited their children's freedom by keeping young ones close to home for as long as possible and worked to promote traditional family values. Comparatively, families in Mexico had significantly different perceived levels of neighborhood safety. Families lived in both rural and urban areas. These parents were more comfortable providing their children with more freedom, trusting in the community to keep an eye on them. Within this study, environmental risk exerts pressure on these two groups of parents differently, subsequently affecting parenting decisions. Given these families' environmental contexts, the risk response by the parents living in the U.S. is intended to keep their children safe.

Given that both parenting practices and cultural beliefs are widely recognized to be transmitted intergenerationally (Belsky, Conger, & Capaldi, 2009; Brannen, 2006; Serbin & Karp, 2003), environmental risk factors likely shape how later generations reconstruct parenting practices with their own children and the familial cultural values that reinforce them. Regarding the children in Reese's (2002) study, their baseline parenting strategy with their own future children might reflect a propensity to keep children closer to home. In this

¹While these cultural values may be seen as important within other groups in the U.S., smaller qualitative studies examining specific Latino groups have suggested that Latino parents rank *respeto* and *familismo* more highly than other groups do (e.g., Calzada et al., 2010; Gonzalez-Ramos, Zayas, & Cohen, 1998).

way, the influences of baseline cultural beliefs that shape parenting are contingent on environmental influences.

The example above indicates that traditional Latino family values are not simply displaced by a Western model of parenting; instead parents adapt and respond to differing environmental circumstances, which intergenerationally alter the presentation and role of the traditional models. This framework is self-reinforcing, since families everywhere are subject to a complex interplay of ecological factors that constantly renegotiate what values and lessons are important for children to learn for survival. This illustrates the adaptive nature of parenting and the importance of understanding potential environmentally driven decision-making.

Although the ecological environmental risk framework allows a depiction of culture *and* parenting that incorporates environmental influences, I further expand the framework to recognize that environmental familial conditions are often a result of structural and institutional inequalities. This addition allows an understanding of parenting practices, through a macro lens, as “outgrowths of culturally-conditioned responses to structural differences in opportunity” (Sherman & Harris, 2012, p. 64). It completes an important theoretical relationship, allowing for the acknowledgment of the complex interaction between parenting practices, culture, and environmental context (see Figure 1). In this paper, I explore these domains more in depth, beginning with parenting.

2.1 Parenting young children

Parenting young children involves constant caring for both a child's basic physical needs and promoting their social, emotional, and cognitive growth through a consistent, nurturing, and secure relationship. This relationship is one where the primary caregiver is attuned to their child's needs, has developmentally appropriate expectations of child behavior, and seeks to sensitively relieve their distress (Combs-Orme et al., 2003; Zeanah & Zeanah, 2009). Drawing from Bradley and Caldwell (1995), Combs-Orme and colleagues (2003) presented a framework for parenting behaviors specific for young children within their developmental context. This framework outlines five categories that describe specific parenting needs for infants: sustenance, supervision/safety, stimulation, support and affection, and structure. Within these basic parenting needs for young children, actual observable parenting practices vary depending on a family's culture and context.

Although a significant amount of literature exists addressing many aspects of parenting, much of the research has been built on child-rearing ideologies and behavioral norms formed by observations of White middle-class family values and cultural norms (Garcia Coll & Meyer, 1993; Lancy, 2007). For instance, one dominant theory traditionally defines controlling maternal parenting behaviors as insensitive, interfering, and over-stimulating with assumed negative consequences on infants' emotional development (Carlson & Harwood, 2003). Studies observing Puerto Rican and Mexican American parent-infant/toddler pairs have found that these mothers provide significantly higher mean levels of physical control and guidance in their interactions with their children during feeding, play, and teaching than do White mothers (Carlson & Harwood, 2003; Ispa et al., 2004). While a high level of control was associated with insecure attachment for White families, that was

not the case for Puerto Rican parents (Carlson & Harwood, 2003). This finding may seem to confirm the dominant theory that controlling parenting with young children has negative effects on parent-child relationships for White families, but it also suggests that this relational theory may not accurately predict effects on attachment for Puerto Rican families. Carson and Harwood (2003) argue that a Western emphasis on individual autonomy drives parents to “follow the child's lead” and exhibit less guidance and control, thus encouraging individualism. In contrast, many Latino communities emphasize interdependence and collectivism, which may result in parenting behaviors that are construed by outsiders as controlling, but in fact seek to guide children to meet expectations commensurate with cultural values. This challenges long-held beliefs by early childhood and infant mental health researchers and practitioners around non-directive approaches, instead framing such approaches as reflections of a parenting behavior whose goal is to encourage individual autonomy versus a collective- or community-centered approach. This observed propensity for Latino parents to engage in more directed and guiding interactions with their infants and toddlers suggests that some parents may struggle with parenting interventions that assert a child-directed approach framed by theory developed using a White, middle class model of relating.

Controlling and protective behavior displayed by Latino parents may be interpreted as congruent with an authoritarian parenting stance (Baumrind, 1966; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). While more recent conceptualization of the classical parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful) by Baumrind (2012) have worked to differentiate coercive and confrontive control, previously conflated among authoritative/authoritarian parenting behaviors, the original parenting styles are often still used as a standard in research on parenting. Scholars have critiqued that the conceptualization of these classical parenting styles was formed using White, middle-class family values and cultural norms that fail to take into account Latino norms (Domenech Rodríguez, Donovan, & Crowley, 2009). Research examining parenting styles among a largely Mexican American sample found a disconnection between traditional, dominantly theorized, parenting style categories and observable Latino parenting interactions. Moving forward, there is a need to conceptualize the way Latino parenting styles are viewed to account for cultural variation and the contexts in which parenting occurs (Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2009). Incorporating Baumrind's (2012) more recent theory on parental control in research on Latino parenting styles, in addition to examining differences within and across Latino communities, may provide more nuance to our understanding of Latino parenting.

Childrearing beliefs and values of Latino parents often exemplify the tension between *individualism* valued in mainstream U.S. culture and *collectivism* valued in many Latino communities. Researchers have found that many Latino families across different countries of origin (Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Colombian, and other Central/South American families) and a range of family socioeconomic situations share similar parenting values such as *respeto* and *familismo* (Calzada et al., 2010; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Garrison & Weiss, 1979; Gurak & Kritz, 1984; Harwood, Miller, & Lucca Irizarry, 1995; Reese et al., 1995). Some Dominican and Mexican parents express frustration arising from

their perception that traditional American values focus on individualism and personal achievement, which they see as undermining their attempts to instill respect and concern for collectivity (Calzada et al., 2010; Reese, 2002). Parents in Reese's (1995) study shared that the exposures of their children to Western cultural values increasingly lead to familial conflict. These parents articulated feelings ranging from concern to outrage regarding potential interference by social services in family disciplinary practices, which they see as further undermining their ability to parent (Reese et al., 1995). As parents work to navigate balancing their traditional values with exposure to dominant American values, parent child-relationships can be affected by resulting conflicts.

2.2. Latino cultural variation

To better understand and delineate the numerous variables affecting parenting for Latino families with young children, it is important to deconstruct the role of culture and context within their lives. Culture itself is not simply a static variable; much like the phenomenon of parenting discussed above, it is continually reproduced. Not only does culture affect the choices individuals make or activities they choose to engage in, but also culture is reciprocally affected and transformed by those same choices. Often researchers, and society at large, present culture as a group-level variable, which can be problematic when applied to individual persons or families who may be a part of that group. Latinos are frequently presented as if they are a homogenous ethnic group. While commonalities across various Latino populations exist, focusing on broad categories in order to capture or control for culture ignores numerous factors that affect the presentation of culture within subgroups.

To more accurately capture the impact of culture on parenting, and its complicated role in a parenting framework, within-group heterogeneity of the broader aggregated Latino ethnicity must be assessed. Guided by Harwood and colleagues' (2002) suggested considerations when delineating Latino subgroups, I turn now to examining diversity between Latino cultural groups as a function of the country of origin of a family unit, which interrelates with their personal and historical circumstances of U.S. arrival, and their level of acculturation.

2.2.1. Country of origin and historical and circumstance of U.S. arrival—Within the “Latino” umbrella category is a very diverse population with roots in over 20 countries (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Latinos in the U.S. come from a broad range of countries from within North, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean. According to an analysis of U.S. Census data by Ennis, Rio-Vargas, and Albert (2011), Mexican origin individuals constitute the largest group of Latinos (63%), followed by Puerto Rican (9%), Cuban (4%), and Dominican (3%). The remaining 21% is composed of individuals who identified as from other Central American (8%; includes Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Republic of Panama, El Salvador) and South American (6%; includes Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela) countries, Spaniard origin (1%), or who listed general terms such as “Hispanic” or “Latino”.²

²It is important to note these calculations exclude 3.7 million U.S. citizens living in Puerto Rico, who almost entirely identify as Latino. Island living Puerto Ricans are often discounted from the discussion of U.S. Latinos and underrepresented in the literature. The well-being of island living Puerto Rican children is significantly worse than that of Latino children in the U.S. (Annie E Casey Foundation, 2012); thus, this population warrants further investigation.

Country of origin captures an array of variables that may be different from country to country, including historical circumstances, environmental exposures, pathways to the U.S., and regional variations of language and values. Moreover, understanding that even within subgroups there may be variability resulting in individual differences is important (Phinney, 1996). For example, as researchers work to adapt interventions for Latino groups, a strategy some use is to incorporate culturally relevant metaphors or sayings (e.g., Muñoz & Mendelson, 2005). Care must be taken to not assume universal relevancy or understanding of an expression for all Latino groups, because colloquial sayings and Spanish word meanings vary by region. Exploration of country of origin and the role of specific regional beliefs regarding family and parenting is important when engaging these families in research and practice.

Across the many Latino subgroups, there are vastly different historical and personal circumstances related to being in the U.S. Political instability caused by historical American occupation and interference has led to violent coups, guerrilla warfare, oppression, and economic devastation in many Latin American countries. These intentional maneuverings often favored lucrative economic benefits for large U.S. companies and the acquisition of strategic U.S. military locations and staging areas (González, 2011). Each country has a unique history and provides a different backdrop of reasons why families may migrate or immigrate to the U.S. and what environmental contexts they were leaving and were met with on their arrival (González, 2011).

The contrast between migration patterns from Mexico and Cuba exemplifies the importance of environmental and cultural contexts. Mexicans in the U.S. have the unique position of being both early settlers and pioneers and the largest group of new arrivals over the last several decades (González, 2011). Many Mexicans were forcefully “acquired” as a result of early American Western expansion through the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Mexican cession of approximately 525,000 square miles of its land. More recent Mexican immigration trends, since the 1990s, have resulted from widespread poverty in Mexico and economic opportunities available in the U.S. (González, 2011). Comparatively, Cubans had a very different immigration history to the U.S., resulting in a different reception into the country. Cuban immigration to the U.S. occurred over multiple waves beginning in the late 19th century through present day. Each wave of immigration had distinct characteristics with drastic disparities in class, education, and race; earlier waves had more education, skills, and resources than did later waves. Because of U.S. anti-communist policy that began during the Cold War era many Cuban refugees received large amounts of federal aid (business credit, startup loans, Medicaid, food stamps, free English classes, scholarships, low interest college loans, cash allotments) that most other immigrants from Latin American countries were not afforded. While these benefits have shifted somewhat over the last 20 years, refugee status continues to offer unique benefits to Cubans who qualify. It is evident that the historic, and present day, differences between how Mexican and Cuban immigrants came to be in the U.S. has substantial implications for the structure of a family's safety net and impact on their socioeconomic condition. Political, and societal, support for an immigrant's path to documentation significantly alters access to social support services. Exploring these many different origin stories is essential when engaging with these communities from the

individual to the national level in order to meet the diverse needs of Latino children and families.

In addition to the issues described above, the growing anti-immigrant socio-political climate in the U.S. targeting Latino groups has potentially strong effects on parent-child relationships. The last decade has seen an increase in documented hate crimes against Latinos, which have been found to be positively related to increased immigration rates (Stacey, Carbone-López, & Rosenfeld, 2011). Some have attributed the increased violence to the escalating public debates on immigration reform in many states (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2008). These increased social and political tensions and experiences of discrimination and racism exert stress on families. Evidence has linked discrimination experienced in the Latino community with increased mental health concerns (Araújo & Borrell, 2006). This climate and its influence on parenting remains an unexamined topic in the literature.

2.2.2. Level of acculturation—Altogether, Latinos have varying levels of acculturation and experience in American communities, and Latino immigrants are at an elevated risk for experiencing acculturative stress, resulting from exposure to major stressors related to moving to a new culture, such as being exposed to discrimination and racism, leaving behind family and other social supports, facing financial strain, and struggling with language difficulties. The majority of Latino children are born in the U.S.: 37% are U.S.-born with two U.S.-born parents, 55% are U.S.-born with at least one U.S.-born parent, and 11% were foreign born (Fry & Passel, 2009). Approximately 28% of these families have at least one parent who is estimated to be undocumented (Fry & Passel, 2009). This represents a significant life stressor in the lives of almost a third of these families. Furthermore, despite most of these children being U.S.-born, many parents may carry traditional cultural values at odds with U.S. social norms and expectations (McCabe et al., 1999; Rios-Ellis, 2005; Santiago-Rivera, 2003). Even though evidence indicates that traditional family values may decline or shift across generations (Gil & Vega, 1996), including these values within a parenting framework is essential because values, beliefs, and behaviors are contingent on family context such as level of acculturation and socioeconomic status (Gonzalez-Ramos et al., 1998; Harwood, Schoelmerich, Ventura-Cook, Schulze, & Wilson, 1996).

Within the acculturation literature, shifts in Latino family values and parenting are attributed to the acculturation process, with changes being generally gradual (Garcia Coll & Pachter, 2002; Harkness, Super, & Keefer, 1992). Acculturation has been measured using a variety of variables, including length of residence, generational status, English language proficiency and usage, and more recently, changes in cultural values and beliefs. Different studies of Latinos have identified different sets of changes. An early study examining Mexican families found the longer they lived in the U.S., and the more comfortable they were speaking English, the more independent and achievement-focused family members became, whereas over time family cohesion and internal family functioning remained unchanged (Rueschenberg & Buriel, 1989).

Then in 1996, Gil and Vega studied Cuban and Nicaraguan families in the Miami area. They found that while family cohesion deteriorated significantly as a function of acculturation and

time in the U.S., adherence to beliefs of *familism* remained high (Gil & Vega, 1996). In this study, Nicaraguan families experienced acculturative stress at much higher rates than did Cuban families. This finding was attributed to the very different experiences these groups have in the U.S., particularly in that geographic region. It was suggested that the Cuban community in the Miami area was well established and facilitated higher levels of social and economic opportunities for Cuban families. While time in this country plays a large role in a more established community, this success may also be in part due to social and governmental supports not available to many other immigrant communities. In contrast, Nicaraguan families tended to be more recently immigrated and with less developed formal and informal supports in place, which may have resulted in the Nicaraguans having more prolonged exposures to acculturative stressors. More recently among a sample of Cuban, Colombian, Honduran, and Nicaraguan immigrants, high levels of acculturative stress was found to be related to decreases in family cohesion over the first two years in the U.S. (Dillon, De La Rosa, & Ibañez, 2013). These varied findings paint a complicated picture of the impact of acculturation on shifting Latino values, highlighting the role of acculturative stress on parenting and the family system.

Research has shown an association between acculturative stress and mental health, and this implies potential issues for parenting. Many Mexican immigrants have experienced psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Hovey, 2000; Hovey & Magaña, 2000, 2002). Some research has indicated that the longer a person of Mexican descent lives in the U.S., the worse their health and well-being is (Finch & Vega, 2003). For Cubans and Nicaraguans, high levels of acculturative stress has been seen to increase cultural conflict within the family thereby having negative consequences on parent-child relationships (Gil & Vega, 1996). Overall, increased psychological distress has negative consequences on parenting such as increased negativity and unsuccessful disciplinary practices (Berg-Nielsen, Vikan, & Dahl, 2002; Duncan & Reder, 2000).

While the process of learning to live within a new culture is clearly stressful for many families, holding to traditional cultural values and connections to their country of origin may serve as important protective factors. For Mexican immigrants, the resiliency of the family can be a source of strength, allowing families to maintain a sense of cohesion and flexibility as they are confronted with their new environments (Hancock, 2005). Evidence indicates for families of Mexican, South American, and Central American descent, a well-functioning family environment can provide a buffer from acculturative stress, particularly during the early stages of acculturation (Miranda, Estrada, & Firpo-Jimenez, 2000; Miranda & Matheny, 2000). Since the relationship between acculturation, acculturative stress, and protective cultural values is complicated for Latino groups, more research is necessary to understand optimal points of support and intervention unique to each community.

2.3. Environment: Structural and institutional inequalities

The many cultural variables described above must also be understood within families' environmental circumstances, which often involve structural and institutional inequalities. This is evident for Latino children and their families. In 2010, more Latino children (birth to 18 years old) were living in poverty than any other racial or ethnic group (37.3% Latino vs.

30.5% White, and 26.6% Black) in the U.S. (Lopez & Velasco, 2011). Even more concerning are reports that 65% of all Latino and Black children are now living below 200% of the federal poverty level (compared to 19% White and 33% Asian; National Center for Health Statistics, 2012). The number of impoverished Latino children is unsettling given that families living in poverty have significantly higher rates of exposure to widespread environmental and social inequalities and community violence than do their economically advantaged counterparts.

In a 2004 review of literature examining the environmental inequities experienced by low-income children, Evans found that poor families were more likely to live in neighborhoods with environmental pollution, community violence, less green space, more physical deterioration, less community capital, and inferior educational environments. As described earlier, young children are particularly susceptible to negative environmental exposures (Sheridan & Nelson, 2009). If you consider that 38% of impoverished Latino children are less than 5 years old (Lopez & Velasco, 2011), exposure to these cumulative risk factors is alarming and will likely place Latino children, disproportionately, on a trajectory leading to deleterious long-term consequences.

2.3.1. Educational and economic opportunities and inequalities—Lack of educational opportunities may have detrimental consequences for parenting practices. Education plays a large role in a family's ability to achieve upward economic mobility (Haskins, Holzer, & Lerman, 2009) and for young children access to early education is critical for supporting social, emotional, and cognitive development (Barnett, 2002). Beginning in preschool, disparities emerge in both enrollment and quality indicators of education for Latino children (Fuller & Kim, 2011a, 2011b). In 2005, 53% of Latino 4 year olds were enrolled in preschool (Fuller & Kim, 2011a). While this demonstrated an increase over the previous decade, it was still significantly less than Black 4 year olds (69%) and Whites (70%). These early, persistent disparities in educational experiences set the stage for poor educational attainment in both secondary and postsecondary schooling (Ryan & Siebens, 2012; Santiago & Soliz, 2012). In 2010, it was reported that 37% of Latinos 18 and over had not graduated from high school, with one in five Latinos having less than a ninth grade education (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). In 2011, only 21% of Latino adults received an Associate's degree or higher – which is less than their Black (30%), White (44%), and Asian (57%) counterparts (Santiago & Soliz, 2012). This is notable because research examining Mexican American parents, family stress resulting from parents being unemployed, underemployed, and/or inconsistently employed adversely affects parenting practices and parent-child relationships (Barrera et al., 2002; Parke et al., 2004). Barrera and colleagues (2002) found that perceived economic hardship was associated with increased parental depressive symptoms among Mexican American parents, which then predicted less supportive parenting. Similar findings were observed in another sample of Mexican American parents, where economic hardship was associated with parental depressive symptoms, predicting hostile parenting (Parke et al., 2004).

2.3.2. Access to health care—Factors that impact access to and quality of health care include language differences, lack of linguistic competency among providers, affordability,

lack of health insurance, transportation difficulties, and lack of cultural understanding by providers (Flores, Abreu, Olivar, & Kastner, 1998). Latino children are less likely than White children to have access to regular medical care and more likely to be uninsured, have reduced access to health care services, and problems receiving specialty care (Flores & Tomany-Korman, 2008). Latino children of immigrants have even poorer access to routine health care and lower rates of insurance than do children of at least one U.S.-born parent (Granados, Puvvula, Berman, & Dowling, 2001; Ku & Matani, 2001). A study from the 2000 National Survey of Early Childhood Health looked at 2,608 children, ages 4 to 35 months, and found that Latino and Black children were less likely to be in excellent health and more likely to be uninsured than were their white counterparts (Flores, Olson, & Tomany-Korman, 2005). Their parents were less likely to feel their medical providers understood their child-rearing preferences, suggesting that Latino parents may feel less trusting of their child's medical providers and thus less likely to express developmental concerns with the providers.

Poor health care access and low levels of comfort with providers may lead to decreased preventative health care. This lack of contact would mean missed opportunities for parenting support since pediatric preventative health care visits focus on parent education in child development, parenting support, as well as screening for developmental and behavioral problems. Some problems can be prevented entirely with early support. Reduced frequency of access to these interactions with pediatric specialists can result in delays identifying and intervening in issues that arise. If pediatricians were more accessible and understanding of Latino parents' needs, the practitioners' contacts with these parents might be important interventive and preventive avenues.

2.3.3. Health consequences of environmental inequities—Social and institutional inequity burdens Latino children with significant disparities across many domains of health. Latino children endure high levels of social and environmental health risk factors and poor health status, including medical, dental, and psychological (Carter-Pokras, Zambrana, Poppell, Logie, & Guerrero-Preston, 2007; Flores et al., 2002; Vega et al., 2009). For example, Puerto Rican children have the highest rates and most severe forms of asthma among all racial or ethnic groups (Lara, Akinbami, Flores, & Morgenstern, 2006). Latino children are more likely than White children to have an insufficient amount of food, be iron deficient, or be overweight (Zambrana, Carter-Pokras, Nunez, Valdez, & Villarruel, 2004). Obesity prevalence rates are high in Latino children. Mexican American children (ages 6-11) have been found to have a higher rate of obesity (25%) than do either their White (19%) and Black American counterparts (19%; Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, Lamb, & Flegal, 2010). Latino children and families are also at disproportionately high risk for exposure to air pollutants, pesticides, toxic industrial chemicals, lead, and mercury, which all carry serious consequences for health (for review see Carter-Pokras et al., 2007).

2.4. Summary

The literature on Latino parenting practices remains inadequate, with a large proportion examining Latino families broadly, while devoting little attention to within-group differences. “Ethnic glossing” mutes potential unique areas of risk and protection that could

be important factors in developing meaningful prevention and intervention efforts. The Latino parenting framework presented here (see Figure 1) provides a way to organize contextual factors at play in the lives of Latino families – displaying the forces influencing parenting for young children.

The framework draws from Quinlan and Quinlan's (2007) environmental risk framework and suggests that parenting is reciprocally affected by culture and environment, which is greatly influenced by institutional and structural inequalities. Attending to institutional, environmental, and cultural factors will enhance theory-building, research, and practice with Latino families. Without these important considerations, the dominant understandings and approaches used by social service practitioners for this group will remain deficient.

For families with young children in particular, this framework would be incomplete without incorporating culturally and contextually congruent principles of parenting young children. Parent stressors and needs are unique for this age and developmental period. It is evident that Latino families experience major social inequalities, which affect parenting—with varying degrees of impact and exposure among different communities. More research is needed to elucidate community-specific risk and protective factors for Latino subgroups. The intention of this framework is to provide a guide for researchers and clinicians as they navigate interpreting, understanding, and supporting Latino parents.

3. Latino families and the child welfare system

Using the framework presented here, I now turn to examining the experiences and impacts of families of young Latino children who are at risk for, or engaged in, the public child welfare system. This is a particularly vulnerable population where understandings and interpretations of parenting have serious consequences on families with young children. When families become involved in the child welfare system, their parenting is constantly judged, and high stakes decisions are made based on those judgments. Latino children are a population ever more present in the child welfare system, but little is still known about how they fare. To start, this section first examines the risk of child welfare involvement for Latino children and disproportionality within the system. Then, I will discuss the ways in which Latino cultural factors are unaccounted for, or in conflict with, the child welfare system. Lastly, I will explore sources of inequality confronting Latino children and parents.

3.1. Risk of child welfare involvement

Concurrent with the general population increase Latinos are widely recognized as the fastest growing population in child welfare systems. Nationally the proportion of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect in which the child was Latino increased from 14% in 2000 to 21% in 2010 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, & Children's Bureau, 2002, 2011). Research studies examining Latino racial and ethnic disparities within the child welfare system have produced mixed results. While some prior research indicates Latino children are not over represented (Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003; Kim, Chenot, & Ji, 2011), other analyses have identified patterns of disproportionality when investigating across state and county levels (Hines et al., 2003; Jones, 2006). Scholars argue

these inconsistent reports are in part related to the tendency of Latinos to concentrate in certain geographic locations. Historically there have been “destination states” that are more likely to appeal to Latino immigrants due to available employment opportunities or pre-existing ethnic enclaves (Ortega, Guilleán, & Najera, 1996). In these more heavily represented communities, disproportionately higher levels of substantiation and placements in out-of-home care have been identified for Latinos (Ortega et al., 1996). For example, in California researchers found that while Latinos comprised 30% of the total child population, they constituted 52% of the child welfare cases (Hines et al., 2003).

A recent study in California examining the role of individual and family risk factors on racial disparities of child welfare involvement for young children ($N=531,035$) produced results further complicating the understanding of disproportionality (Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013). When the results were assessed without accounting for other factors, Latino children born to U.S.-born mothers were 1.55 times more likely than White children to be referred, have maltreatment substantiated, and be placed outside the home. In contrast children of foreign-born mothers were less likely than White children to be system involved. However, after adjusting for socioeconomic and health indicators, the relative risk compared to Whites of referral, substantiation, and out-of-home placement was significantly *lower* for Latinos (regardless of where the mother was born). The authors concluded that race and ethnicity are indicators for the complex interaction between economic, social, political, and environmental factors that influence the health of individuals and communities (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013), while also underscoring the importance of research that accounts for factors I present in the Latino parenting framework. This study points to the complexity of disproportionality and in light of the predicted continued growth of the Latino child population, disproportionality warrants closer examination. It is clear, however, that the practice of aggregating data obscures disproportionality in communities with high Latino representation.

3.2. Young Latino children and child welfare

When Latino children enter the child welfare system they are younger than non-Latinos at their time of referral and substantiation, with those under 5 years of age at greatest risk of being removed from their home. Among children placed in out-of-home care, the percentage of those birth-to-two-years old is significantly higher among Latinos than non-Latinos (50% vs. 24%; Alzate & Rosenthal, 2009). This is alarming because infants, regardless of race and ethnicity, are already at increased risk of out-of-home placement, with 1 in 4 children placed outside the home being under 12 months old (Wulczyn, Ernst, & Fisher, 2011). Experiences of infants in out-of-home placements vary, but are often incongruent with the need very young children have for consistent, sensitive, and nurturing care in order to foster healthy development. Thus infants in out-of-home care are particularly vulnerable to social, emotional, and cognitive developmental delays (Wulczyn et al., 2011). In general, young children remain in care longer than older children do (Wulczyn & Hislop, 2002) and are less likely to be reunified with their families (Courtney, 1994). These adverse childhood experiences and early negative environmental exposures have long-term consequences on physical, social, and mental health through to adulthood (Anda et al., 2006; Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, Chen, & Matthews, 2010; Norman et al., 2012).

Several models exist theorizing the complicated pathways that lead Latino families to the child welfare system (e.g., Garcia, 2009). Some scholars argue that the numerous cumulative multi-level risk factors experienced by Latino families discussed thus far contribute to Latinos increasing overrepresentation in the child welfare system (Hill, 2006; Hines, Lemon, Wyatt, & Merdinger, 2004). Others suggest the distribution of these risk factors, caused by structural inequalities, impact Latino children at higher rates than White children (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Fontes (2002) offers another perspective, suggesting that Latino parents may be reported to child welfare services more often because non-Latino child welfare workers may misunderstand unfamiliar parenting practices and because Latino parents may respond with physical discipline quickly, even when in public places. Layered on top of the different pathways to child welfare engagement is the inherent system bias for young children of swiftly moving them into out-of-home services due to systemic concerns for developmental vulnerability and high rates of maltreatment for this age group (Church, 2006). This broad picture of complex inequality leaves vulnerable Latino families at the doorstep of a challenging public system that struggles to account for their unique cultural and contextual experiences.

3.3. Latino cultural factors and child welfare

Research exploring Latino parents involved in the child welfare system has grown over the last 10 years, but remains limited and constrained by a lack of state and national child welfare reporting systems that uniformly records meaningful variables on Latino families that may account for culture (ethnicity, country of origin, time in the U.S.). The first study examining differences between U.S.-born (n=406) and foreign-born (n=230) parents involved in the child welfare system using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) identified clear differences in risk factors between the two groups (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009). First, foreign-born parents had significantly lower rates of active drug use, better parenting skills, and lower levels of family stress than did U.S.-born parents. Second, when examining the most prevalent risk factors, researchers found that both groups shared high levels of family stress as the most prevalent risk factor. Their second most prevalent risk factor was different: history of child maltreatment was identified for U.S.-born families, whereas low social support was identified for foreign-born parents. While immigrant families might be perceived as being more at risk in many areas, this study identified that several risk factors for maltreatment are more prevalent in U.S.-born families, which provides insight into previous findings that immigrant families are underrepresented in some state child welfare systems (e.g., Vericker, Kuehn, & Capps, 2007). This study further delineates different characteristics that may be glossed over when Latinos are grouped together without consideration to within-group differences, in this case, parental nativity. When looking to develop, translate, or implement prevention or intervention efforts, it is important to understand these key differences in possible risks found within subgroups of a larger category to have effective outcomes with these populations.

As Latino parents engage with the child welfare system they are confronted with a complex and often confusing organization. Latino families bring with them their unique worldview, which can often be at odds with how child welfare workers approach their casework, and

often feel silenced by their caseworkers (Ayón & Aisenberg, 2010; Ayón, Aisenberg, & Erera, 2010). For example, Latinos' worldview of collectivism and *familismo*, which lend more to a community- and family-centered intervention approach, clashes with the child welfare system's child-centered policies. This disconnection between the needs and expectations the family brings to their engagement in the system and the reality of the institutional limitations (approach with families, system focus on child safety, institutional financial constraints) impacts caseworker-parent relationships (Ayón & Aisenberg, 2010). These relationships are important as parents navigate the system to successfully complete services and reunify with their children.

3.4. Experiences of structural and institutional inequities within child welfare

When involved in the child welfare system, Latino children also experience disparate access to mental health services. Specifically, Latino children are significantly less likely than White children to receive mental health services (Garland et al., 2000). Even when exhibiting lower levels of mental health symptoms, White children were found to be more likely to receive services. In fact, the rate of service use for White children with the lowest need was the same as the rate of service use for the highest need Latino children (Garland, Landsverk, & Lau, 2003). When Latino children do engage in services, they are likely to have fewer visits than White children have (Leslie et al., 2000). Since child mental health issues are associated with parent psychopathology and the use of punitive parenting strategies (Vostanis et al., 2006), it is worrying that Latino children are less likely to receive these supportive services.

Families who engage with the child welfare system are often court-mandated to complete a standard set of services that can include parent training, mental health and substance use assessment and treatment, and domestic violence counseling. Latino parents find themselves facing barriers to completing such services. Caseworkers report several barriers for Latinos families including documentation status, lack of health insurance, language barriers, lack of linguistic competency among licensed service providers, and overall parents' lack of knowledge of the system (Ayón, 2009). Many barriers faced by these parents often result in families' experiencing longer wait times; having access to less experienced, unlicensed practitioners; and having longer commutes to services. This is troubling given the 12-month period for permanency decisions called for by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). This act requires, with specific exceptions, that workers file for the termination of parental rights for children who have been in care for 15 of the last 22 months. Thus the law arguably puts more emphasis on adoption versus family reunification, and the service mandates required can be difficult for any family to achieve, even without the added barriers that Latino families may face (Suleiman, 2004).

4. Discussion and implications

My primary objective in this paper was to provide a conceptual parenting framework for guiding work with Latino families with infants. The framework includes conceptualizations and understandings of parenting within Latino families that account for culture and environment, because these domains are inseparably connected — affecting one another over time and across generations. Understanding culture is critical for creating a clear

picture of parenting. Yet, in research and practice culture continues to be incompletely captured, applied, and understood outside of broad ethnic generalizations.

4.1. Research implications

This paper takes initial steps in bringing together a complicated literature base. Further research is needed in developing testable models, within and across domains. It is important that the models can more specifically explore the relationships between the constructs in this framework for Latino families to qualitatively and quantitatively understand optimal points of intervention and prevention more clearly. While significant information exists indicating the increased likelihood young Latino children are at risk of social disparities, less is understood about the heterogeneity of this ethnic group – particularly using large samples. In order to get better insight into how these cultural and environmental experiences present and interact with parenting and mental health, researchers must elicit feedback about the applicability of the domains in this framework from Latino families within their respective communities.

For Latino families who find themselves at the entrance of the child welfare system, it is vital that ethnicity and culture are examined with nuance. Early evidence supports that more research is needed to disentangle disproportionality and risk and protective factors by country of origin, parent nativity, and geographic location, which are currently obscured by analyses of aggregated data. Family economic and environmental conditions must also be considered in this exploration due to the complex relationship between culture and environment. It is not enough to aggregate data on Latinos without regard for within group variation and contextual experiences. For researchers, a paradigm shift is needed in the conceptualization, interpretation, and understanding of what ethnicity represents practically across Latino subgroups. Accounting for culture through the oversimplification of either *Latino* or *non-Latino* perpetuates ethnic glossing of many diverse peoples who likely have unique risk and protective profiles that can be drawn from to create targeted interventions that enhance existing personal, familial, and community strengths.

4.2. Practice implications

Parenting support, trainings, and interventions must attend to Latino cultural values such as *respeto* and *familismo* and account for varying levels of acculturative stress that exert pressure on parents and families. Clinicians and child welfare workers must be mindful in interpretations of parenting behaviors and parent-child interactions, such as the increased guidance and control that may be observed in some Latino families with their young children. Indeed, some Latino parents may find interventions based on mainstream parenting expectations that highlight and encourage the importance of the autonomy of the infant or toddler inconsistent with their beliefs and practices. While more research is needed to clarify this question, building meaningful therapeutic relationships with Latino parents means accessing traditional cultural values and beliefs as a source of strength. Finding ways to honor and reflect these values provides an important step in meaningful engagement.

While these recommendations focus on Latino families, the processes and relationships underlying the framework can be generalized to other groups and used as a platform for

good clinical practice more broadly. Clinicians should approach assessment seeking nuance, complexity, and depth in each family they encounter rather than go in with a race/ethnicity “cookbook” of behavioral and cultural assumptions. This framework is of particular use for educating clinicians, caseworkers, and child welfare workers about the complex multi-level factors that may be at play in the lives of vulnerable families.

4.3. Policy implications

Current dominant research practices perpetuate ethnic glossing, often driven by the lack of data that would illuminate this population more clearly. Within the child welfare system the lack of a clear, accurate, and uniform means of tracking negatively affects Latino children. Not enough is known about how Latino children are faring within the system, particularly young children who are the most vulnerable for system involvement. Many Latino children may be completely unacknowledged due to being listed in the system as Black, White, or just as “a minority” (Ortega et al., 1996). Implementing national data collection standards on all families who come to the attention of the child welfare system would substantially increase our understanding of these families experiences. Legislative action should be taken to get data that is systematically collected, uniform in nature, and include multi-level factors and comprehensive information on culture and ethnicity.

5. Conclusion

Given the rapid growth of young Latino children in the broad U.S. population, and as the swiftest growing population in the child welfare system, it is important that researchers, practitioners, and policy makers clearly understand the cultural, environmental, and social experiences that these families face. Based on the information presented herein, it is clear that more research is needed in many of these areas. Particularly in light of the alarming rates at which Latino children and families are subjected to structural and institutional inequality, which poses a risk to the long-term health of the Latino population. This framework should help inform research and practice with Latino families for the aim of developing more meaningful engagement that accounts for both culture and context.

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Highlights

- Parenting is reciprocally affected by a families culture and environment
- Aggregated data obscures issues of disproportionality and promotes ethnic glossing
- It is not clear how young Latino children are faring in the child welfare system
- Culture needs to be accounted for more complexly than *Latino* or *non-Latino*

Figure 1. Latino parenting framework