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Parenting Activities of Mothers from Three Regions in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the study was comparing parenting activities performed by mothers from three regions in the north, center, and south of Mexico. The sample consisted of 296 participants with a child aged 6–17 years, to whom the Questionnaire Rearing Report for Parents was administered. One-way ANOVA and Scheffé's *post hoc* tests were used for data analysis. The results show that a common pattern of parenting exists among mothers from the three regions, giving priority to the same child-rearing activities. The mothers from the southern region accounted for the main between-group differences. It is concluded that this within-country study contributes to avoiding stereotyped images and helps to provide a more differentiated view of parenting by Mexican mothers from distinct regional and cultural groups.

KEYWORDS

Child-rearing activities; Mexican families; mothers; parenting; regions

Introduction

Child-rearing is a universal function of families in distinct cultural contexts around the world. Cross-cultural research has shown that the educational tasks of the family have persisted through time, despite processes of social change, and continue to be a central feature of socialization at home (Harkness & Super, 2006; Poortinga & Georgas, 2006). However, parenting practices are not static and may vary considerably in time, among generations and between cultures, due to the existence of a close relation with ecological factors, as the main goal of child-rearing is directed precisely toward transmitting cultural patterns and embed the children in their environment (Bornstein, Putnick, & Lansford, 2011). Thus, parenting goals, strategies and beliefs tend to vary according to the demands that prevail in the broader cultural setting, the economic structure of society, human ecology and community characteristics, leading to significant conceptual

differentiations (Keller et al., 2006; Suizzo, 2007) and, therefore, family processes and parental values reflect certain cultural norms, values and lifestyles (Kağitçibaşı, 2013). The practices employed in everyday life, parenting behaviors and the role of all actors involved may show a great variety between distinct regional contexts, which justifies an approach to the study of parenting from a cultural perspective.

The ecological framework provides an adequate theoretical approach for the analysis of parenting activities in different regional environments. Its basic premise is that human activity and diversity can only be understood within the context in which they develop (Berry & Poortinga, 2006). According to Bubolz and Sontag (2009), human ecology theory proposes that family should be seen as an ecosystem which interacts in an interdependent way with multiple other environmental systems. Continuous adaptation processes take place within families in function of the limits and constraints that environments pose, as well as the possibilities and opportunities that may exist. Socialization within the family is aimed at the transmission and shaping of roles, values and behavioral patterns according to the environment; thus, parenting and childcare occur according to the community characteristics and the particular cultural aspects of the social and natural context where parents and children live.

The human ecology framework is particularly appropriate for multicultural studies, as it assumes that cultural diversity affects the interaction between the members of the family group (Gracia & Musitu, 2000). It addresses cross-cultural aspects of parenting beliefs and practices and their relations with the immediate setting and the broader social and natural context, providing a suitable viewpoint for the comparison of variations and similarities in the way parents take care of their children. From this ecological perspective, it is assumed that child-rearing is constructed in a certain environment, which implies that culturally specific elements appear in the distinctive ways how parenting is shaped and influenced by particular beliefs, expectations, and values. These are also important for the role of the perception of socially desirable behavior in parental decision making (Sotomayor-Peterson, Cabeza de Baca, Figueredo, & Smith-Castro, 2013) and provide a guide for parents' child-rearing behaviors (Behnke et al., 2008; Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, & Widaman, 2012). Therefore, cultural elements can be expected to give form to specific everyday practices parents employ in order to accomplish their functions as socializing agents. However, some general elements of parenting are considered to be universal, such as the promotion of the offspring's physical, psychological and social wellbeing, the providing of protection and care, guaranteeing the children's health and the stimulation of their educational achievement (Bornstein, 2012).

Parenting in the Mexican context

In the Mexican context, several studies illustrate that in recent years a shift toward different parenting models has taken place. Gradually, parents tend to abandon the traditional model based on authoritarian child-rearing practices and asymmetrical, vertical interaction patterns with their children (Díaz-Guerrero, 1999; Leñero, 1996). They are currently inclined to adopt more authoritative strategies, focused on the fulfillment of their children's needs, desires and interests through the establishment of an effective and personal interaction with them, stimulating bi-directional communication and providing support, affection, and advice (Infante & Martínez, 2016). Parental supervision and establishing limits also continue to be important, but in a different way, not through parents' authoritarian practices and demanding only strict obedience from their children, but initiating and maintaining a dialog with them, calling their attention, negotiating and employing nonphysical ways of punishing (Flores, Cortés, & Góngora, 2008). The mothers' role in socialization at home continues to be central; although a growing female participation in education and labor force has been observed during the past decades, and child-rearing is increasingly seen as a shared responsibility of mothers and fathers in two-parent families (Rojas, 2011), in the daily organization and distribution of household tasks Mexican women generally continue to be the main responsible for childcare and domestic activities. Changes in the gender distribution of child-rearing and growing male participation in household labor tasks are taking place only gradually and have been identified mainly in urban families and couples with higher education degrees (Esteinou, 2008; García, 2007; García & de Oliveira, 2006).

Although a growing number of studies on parenting has been carried out in Mexico in recent years, comparative research on parenting by mothers from different regions of the country is still very scarce. An exploratory study administering an open-end questionnaire concerning child-rearing strategies and the caretaking role of parents in Nuevo León (Moral, 2012), Sonora (Frías, Fraijo, & Tapia, 2012) and the State of Mexico (Oudhof, González Arratia, González, Robles, & Rodríguez, 2012) yielded some data regarding the self-perception of mothers as educators, showing they emphasize certain attributes, particularly being responsible, demanding, understanding and strict. The most frequently performed activities mentioned by the participants were sending their children to school, communication, and teaching values. Disciplinary measures are generally focused on nonphysical punishment, such as grounding and calling their offspring's attention. Although some parenting practices appear to be common among these different locations, the exploratory design of this study and the small samples do not allow firm conclusions on this issue, and so until now very little is

still known about inter-regional patterns and variations of child-rearing in Mexican parents.

This study

This study focuses on child-rearing practices in mothers, whose central role in caregiving is widespread according to cross-cultural research and, therefore, they generally spend more time with their children than fathers (Bornstein, 2013). Consequently, child-rearing mostly falls on the mother and the men's role is frequently limited to helping out around the house (Adams, 2004). In addition, in single-parent family structures, it is generally the mother who takes care of the children. In a 30-nation study on family life among different cultures, the quantitative data that were obtained indicate clearly that in all countries mothers perform the highest level of childcare roles, compared to fathers and other caretakers (Van de Vijver, Mylonas, Pavlopoulos, & Georgas, 2006). The qualitative family portraits that also were included in this study confirm the mothers' role as the central figure in the socialization process at home (Poortinga & Georgas, 2006).

The study was aimed at analyzing the similarities and differences of parenting practices used by mothers who reside in three different regions of Mexico. For this purpose, the concept of rearing activities is employed, which form part of the tasks that should be performed by parents and include several aspects, such as establishing mutual communication between parents and children, taking care of the child's physical and psychological health, assuring adequate housing conditions, generating a favorable living climate within the family group and providing a positive social network with persons outside the household domain (Rink, 2008). These activities constitute the most concrete level of the child-rearing process; they consist of a set of concrete everyday actions parents employ for the education of their children and are assessed by the frequency they are carried out with during a certain period of time (Oudhof & Robles, 2014).

The study was carried out in three cities, similar in population size but located in different parts of the country: northwest, central and southeast Mexico. These cities form part of regions that are not only clearly differentiated in geographical terms, but also have distinct historical and cultural backgrounds: the city of Mérida in the Yucatán peninsula, within the Maya zone; Toluca, a densely populated city in center of the country near Mexico City; and Ciudad Obregón in the northern border state of Sonora. These regions should not simply be seen as a demographic feature of the participants in terms of place of residence, but also represent an important sociocultural dimension, due to their specific and distinct patterns of

historical and economic development, a different composition of the population's ethnic groups and differentiations in traditions and lifestyle. Therefore, in the case of this study, the notion of the region does not only possess a sociodemographic dimension but also constitutes a cultural variable which refers to the specific environments where mothers carry out child-rearing activities.

According to Suizzo (2007) and Bornstein (2012), parenting may show important variations across families from different socioeconomic environments and with specific life circumstances within one society or country. As considerable cultural and social variations exist between the regions of this study, and taking into account the scenario of growing diversity in family life in Mexico (Flores, 2012; Oudhof & Robles, 2014), we formulated as a general research hypothesis that differences between the mothers' child-rearing activities are to be expected, as a result of inter-regional comparison.

Method

Participants

The study was carried out in a sample of 296 mothers, distributed equally among the three research regions: 100 residents of Ciudad Obregón (northern region) and of the city of Toluca (center) and 96 living in Mérida (south). A non-probabilistic intentional sample type was used, with the following inclusion criteria: mothers with at least one child in the range from 6 to 17 years old living in the same household; and being involved in this child's rearing process. The academic level of the participants was diverse, predominating lower and upper high school (38 and 22%, respectively). A proportion of 52% of the participants dedicated themselves exclusively to domestic labor and parenting, and 48% had work outside the household domain. The child-rearing activities were measured in reference to one specific child; 56% in the age range of 6–12 years and 44% from 13 to 17 years old. The distribution by sex of the children was almost equal, 51% male and 49% female.

Instrument

For the measurement of parenting activities, Rink, van Loon, van Lokven, van der Meulen & Jansen (2008) developed the Questionnaire Rearing Report for parents in the Netherlands. This instrument has the main purpose to offer an overall idea of how child-rearing takes place from the parents' perception, assessing the frequency with which they perform these concrete activities related to a specific child. It measures the frequency of

child-rearing activities carried out with respect to one particular child from 6 to 17 years old and the items have four response options, varying from 'almost never' (1) to 'almost always' (4). The cultural adjustment and validation of the questionnaire for Mexican samples were performed by Oudhof & Robles (2014). The final version of the instrument consists of 29 items distributed into six factors: control (6 items), care of physical and mental health (5), care of the socio-emotional environment (5), communication and spending time together (6), satisfaction with rearing (4) and behavior correction (3). The instrument accounts for 37.1% of the variance and its Cronbach's alpha is 0.87.

Procedure

The administration of the instruments took place individually, in public places or the home of the participants. The purpose of the research was explained briefly and they were invited to take part in the study, with their previous consent and guaranteeing the strictly confidential and anonymous use of the data for academic purposes only. For the comparison by region, one-way ANOVA was conducted, and subsequently, Scheffé's *post hoc* tests were used for determining more precisely between which groups differences exist. Additionally, the means of the three most and least frequently performed child-rearing activities were calculated for each region.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the comparison between the parenting activities performed by the mothers from the three regions. Significant differences were obtained for five factors: control, care of physical and mental health, care of the socio-emotional environment, communication and spending time together, and satisfaction with rearing. Behavior correction is the only dimension where no variations between the groups were found. The effect size η^2 varies from 0.038 to 0.097 in the factors where differences were obtained, indicating that the variations are small in most factors and

Table 1. Comparison of mothers' child-rearing activities by region.

Factors	North (<i>n</i> = 100)		Center (<i>n</i> = 100)		South (<i>n</i> = 96)		F	<i>p</i>	η^2
	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD			
Control	3.58	0.44	3.53	0.41	3.37	0.36	5.7	.004	0.038
Physical and mental health	3.56	0.38	3.46	0.43	3.23	0.43	15.7	.001	0.097
Socio-emotional environment	3.55	0.47	3.48	0.44	3.31	0.46	6.7	.001	0.044
Communication	3.23	0.49	3.06	0.57	2.97	0.49	6.4	.002	0.042
Satisfaction with rearing	3.25	0.51	3.02	0.45	3.05	0.52	6.4	.002	0.042
Behavior correction	2.70	0.59	2.57	0.59	2.74	0.54	0.7	.091	0.016

medium in the case of care of physical and mental health, according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. It can also be observed that in all three groups the highest mean scores, varying from frequently to almost always, appear in the aspects of exercising control, taking care of the child's physical and mental health and of the socio-emotional environment, whereas the mothers tend to correct their child's behavior less frequently. These findings suggest that a similar pattern of maternal child-rearing prevails, despite the existence of culturally specific characteristics of the three regions.

Table 2 presents the results of Scheffé's *post hoc* test. In all five factors statistically significant variations between the southern and northern regions were found, and the mean scores on two factors (care of the physical and social health, and care of the socio-emotional environment) differed between the center and the south. The effect size of the differences, calculated by means of Cohen's *d*, tend to be small or moderate; only for the factor taking care of physical and mental health a large effect size between the northern and southern region was obtained. The results reveal that the scores for the Central and northern regions are very similar, forming statistically homogeneous subsets in four factors. Thus, the parenting activities of the participants from the southern region mainly account for the differences between the groups, showing significantly lower mean scores compared with the ones obtained for the mothers from the other two regions.

As each item of the instrument constitutes a specific child-rearing activity, we decided to identify which are the three most and least frequently performed actions by the mothers from each region. Aspects related to monitoring the child's whereabouts prevail among the participants' parenting tasks that have priority and tend to be carried out almost always, as can be observed in the following results:

- North: knowing where the child is (mean score 3.70), preventing dangerous situations for the child (3.68), making sure that the child respects rules and agreements (3.66).
- Center: knowing where the child is (3.68), knowing who the child is with (3.68), providing clothes, toys and school supplies (3.64).

Table 2. Significant differences in child-rearing activities by region (Scheffé's *post hoc* test).

Factor	Region I	Region J	Mean difference (I-J)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Control	North	South	0.18	.005	0.522
Physical and mental health	Center	South	0.22	.001	0.535
	North	South	0.32	.001	0.813
Socio-emotional environment	Center	South	0.16	.041	0.378
	North	South	0.23	.002	0.516
Communication	North	South	0.25	.002	0.531
Satisfaction with rearing	North	Center	0.22	.005	0.478
	North	South	0.20	.018	0.388

- South: knowing where the child is (3.60), knowing who the child is with (3.40), providing clothes, toys and school supplies (3.39).

The least frequently performed activities were the same for mothers of all regions: getting annoyed with the child (mean scores fluctuating between 2.05 and 2.28), collaborating to make the neighborhood adequate for the child (2.13–2.53) and punishing for undesirable behavior (2.48–2.78). Two of these activities, getting annoyed with the child and punishment for undesirable conduct, belong to the behavior correction domain.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate the existence of both similarities and differences in the way Mexican mothers from different parts of the country carry out their everyday rearing activities with regard to a child in the age range from 6 to 17 years. The most important common feature was observed in the frequency pattern of the instrument's factors: in all three regions mothers tend to give the highest priority to exercising control through monitoring their child's whereabouts, taking care of health-related issues and providing an adequate affective environment at home. Communication is also deemed important, whereas applying measures directed toward correcting the child's behavior is the least often practiced. Similar scores between the groups were also obtained for satisfaction with rearing, which constitutes a goal-oriented toward the mother's own performance as an educating person (Mounts & Kim, 2007). Likewise, between-group correspondence prevailed in the specific activities that the participating mothers reported to carry out most and least frequently.

These findings point toward the presence of certain universals in child-rearing, which can be found in distinct cultural contexts (Bornstein 2012; Poortinga & Georgas, 2006); in this case, these universals were identified within one single country, but with considerable regional, ethnic and cultural diversity. Additionally, our findings confirm the tendencies toward a changing view on parenting and the use of different strategies among Mexican mothers nowadays. The traditional authoritarian and vertical model, as described by Leñero (1996) and Díaz-Guerrero (1999), has gradually been replaced by a distinct way of carrying out child-rearing practices. Thus, currently, mothers tend to adopt a more positive parenting approach, taking into account their children's needs, interests, and desires to a much greater degree, and emphasizing the establishment of closer contacts and a bi-directional communication process with their offspring. In this regard, we consider it very illustrative that the behavior correction factor obtained

the lowest mean score, and that specific activities related to this aspect (getting annoyed with the child and punishing it for undesirable behavior) figured among the least frequently practiced actions. The general picture we obtained in this study reflects the contemporary view of parenting and matches the findings of other recent studies on parenting activities in Mexican parents (Flores et al., 2008; Frías et al., 2012; Moral, 2012; Oudhof et al., 2012).

On the other hand, beside these similarities we also found differences in the child-rearing activities carried out by the participants from the regions included in the study, although the effect sizes that were obtained indicate that these variations tend to be small or moderate for most aspects of the parenting process: activities associated with the monitoring of the child's whereabouts and establishing mutual communication were reported to be carried out not very differently by the mothers from the three regions. On the contrary, large variations were found particularly in taking care for the children's physical and mental health, which refers to activities as the prevention of dangerous situations, consideration of physical health conditions and paying attention to their sentiments. This is probably associated to the distinct cultural beliefs that prevail in each context (Keller et al., 2006), which include the perception of how children's health conditions should be taken care of (Oudhof & Robles, 2014), as well as to the specific environmental characteristics of the health care system and infrastructure.

The main dissimilarities were obtained particularly for the mothers living in the city of Mérida, located in the southern Yucatán region, whose scores were generally lower than those of the participants from northern and central Mexico. In a study carried out in this population by Flores et al. (2008), it is reported that Yucatán families are influenced by Mayan roots and tend to be traditional, emphasizing the respect for norms and values and the importance of the family group. However, the parenting strategies employed by the mothers who participated in this study were characterized mainly by more modern elements, such as personal interaction, communication, support, and effective attention, with less use of restrictive control and punitive discipline. Therefore, the description of family life and parenting in Yucatán provided by the authors does not give any indication that might be helpful for explaining the differences with respect to child-rearing activities of mothers from other regions of Mexico. In addition, the composition of the sample's subgroups in terms of sociodemographic variables, such as occupation and schooling level of the mothers, and the child's sex and age, was similar for all three regions in our study, and so these do not account for the between-group variations. We think that the influence of other environmental variables might be relevant, as is posed by the ecological framework; for example, the better public security conditions and

the lower crime rates in this part of the country might be a reason for mothers to be less concerned about constantly monitoring their children and maintaining frequent communication with them. However, this is only a hypothesis that should be further explored in future research.

In our research hypothesis, we formulated the expectation that differences would be obtained in the comparison of the mothers' child-rearing activities by region. Our findings lead us to accept this hypothesis partially, as not only between-group differences were observed, but also important similarities emerged in the parenting patterns and priorities of mothers from different parts of the country.

From a broader theoretical perspective, we consider that this study provides relevant data regarding the child-rearing activities of Mexican mothers from distinct regional and cultural contexts, contributing to a more nuanced and differentiated picture of the characteristics of prevailing parenting patterns and their relation with environmental factors. Our findings confirm that the way mothers exercise certain parenting activities presents some cultural variations according to the context in which they are developed, reflecting the interactions with the immediate community setting, broader social networks and demographic and socioeconomic variables, which is congruent with the human ecology approach. Therefore, it can be inferred that the mothers' parenting activities are adapted to a certain extent in function of the conditions of the areas they live in (Gracia & Musitu, 2000). On the other hand, the ecological perspective also recognizes that basic psychological processes are shared among people from different environments, as Berry & Poortinga (2006) point out. This accounts for the similarities that were found regarding the priorities that the participating mothers of all three regions establish with regard to some aspects of parenting, particularly monitoring the child's activities, taking care of its physical and mental health, providing an adequate environment at home and maintaining bi-directional communication. It should be mentioned that understanding the effects of environment on parenting is difficult, because of the multiple factors that are involved and the complexity of environment itself, which includes both social and natural phenomena (Bradley, 2002). More research is needed on the specific processes by which family ecosystems interact with other socio-cultural systems, and also on the specific mechanisms that they employ for functioning and adjusting in response to the environmental situation (Bubolz & Sontag, 2009).

From a cross-cultural point of view, the results of this study indicate that differences exist in the way mothers from distinct regional contexts within one single country carry out child-rearing tasks. As Harwood, Leyendecker, Carlson, Asencio, and Miller (2002) point out, the use of ethnicity as a cultural variable carries the risk of assuming within-group homogeneity and

may lead to the creation or reinforcement of stereotyped images. This tends to occur particularly in the study of Latino populations in the United States, as ecological diversity in terms of historical background, personal circumstances and socioeconomic status are frequently overlooked, treating all Latinos as one homogeneous ethnic group. In fact, according to the authors, within-group differences have been found in studies on parenting carried out among Latinos in the United States. On the other hand, it is often taken for granted that many differences in psychological variables 'must' exist between distinct ethnic and/or cultural groups, especially in a large country with so much regional diversity as Mexico. Popular belief tends to overestimate the variations in behaviors, attitudes, values and personality traits of people and groups living in different regions. Thus, comparative research on parenting in specific locations is useful for providing a more realistic picture of the way child-rearing actually takes place in different local environments and contributes to constructing a more balanced view of existing regional and cultural differences and similarities.

Limitations and future research

One of the limitations of this study concerns the composition of the sample, which consisted of mothers only and, therefore, focuses exclusively upon their perception of how parenting takes place and the frequency with which they carry out parenting activities. It would be interesting to contrast this vision with the experiences of fathers and other family members who function as educators at home, and particularly to take into account the perception of children regarding their own rearing situation and process. It should also be mentioned that the samples were drawn from urban areas; a complete picture of regional child-rearing practices would require the inclusion of participants from rural areas. Additionally, other environmental and personal variables should be included in future studies, particularly socioeconomic status, which can play an important intermediate role between culture and parenting in distinct groups (Harwood et al., 2002). We also suggest carrying out qualitatively oriented research using interviews or focal groups, as this would help to provide a more in-depth understanding of cultural differences and similarities in parenting practices and their response to ecological constraints and opportunities.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, we consider that this study contributes to exploring the role of cultural and regional factors in parenting, a topic that has been understudied in the Mexican setting. The use of such a comparative

approach is an important tool for research on family-related topics, as it is aimed at a better understanding of the way contemporary families in distinct sociocultural contexts function, how this is reflected in the way parents think and act in their role as educating adults, and how this affects the relationship they establish with their children. As in many other parts of the world, and in the context of global and local processes of social and cultural change, family life in Mexico has been transforming at an accelerated pace over the past decades. Particularly, a diversification of family structures and living arrangements has taken place, which has led to substantial modifications in the roles of mothers, fathers, children and other household members, being frequently very different from the traditional forms of interaction, organization and decision making within the family group. To account for these processes, a dynamic approach for studying family topics is necessary; this will not only contribute to a better understanding of the family in the academic realm but may also have important implications for institutional actions and policy-making in this field.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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