Comparisons of parenting attitudes among five ethnic groups in the United States*

SAIGEETHA JAMBUNATHAN**
DIANE C. BURTS***
SARAH PIERCE****

Parenting attitudes and behaviors and their influence on children has been an area of great interest to researchers. There has been abundant research exploring different types of parenting and the outcomes of parenting. Parents develop their parenting behaviors based on several factors (Belsky, 1984), some of which include socialization experiences, individual familial practices, their personalities, the personality of their child, and their cultural background (Belsky, 1984). While there is much research on parenting, cross-cultural comparisons of parenting attitudes of ethnic and immigrant families in the U.S. have not been the focus of extensive research. The purpose of the present study was to compare the parenting attitudes of immigrant Asian American, Asian Indian, Hispanic, and U. S. native African American and European American mothers.

There has been a tremendous increase in the immigrant population in the U.S. in the past few decades. The immigrant families are going through a flux of changes to adapt themselves to the majority population while at the same time trying to retain their cultural identity and values. The immigrant families are faced with the difficult job of parenting their children in an alien culture and trying to acculturate them to that culture.

Immigrant families face many challenges in attempting to coexist with the majority European American population. Past research indicates that persons with social and political power have created a negative stereotype of members of minority ethnic groups (Padilla, & O' Grady, 1987). Being a target of negative stereotypes and negative attributes may influence one's beliefs about being an ethnic minority or immigrant. These beliefs and feelings may influence the socialization process that minority parents use with their children. The minority immigrant populations use several adaptive strategies to ensure the survival and well being of their families and other members of their group. These adaptive strategies include observable social behaviors that the members use.

A review of literature indicates differences in the way that each minority group tries to fit in. However, there are three adaptive strategies that have emerged as common to most of the ethnic minority groups: family extendedness and role flexibility, biculturalism, and teaching ancestral worldviews (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan,& Buriel, 1990). Family extendedness and role flexibility refers to the pattern of extended family support and networks that usually serve as problem-solving and stress-relieving mechanisms. Biculturalism refers to the ability of a person to function effectively in more than one culture and also to switch roles back and forth as the situation changes. However, the degree of biculturalism varies from family to family. Ancestral worldviews taught to their children by minority parents include the beliefs of the family and community interwoven with those of the self. These three adaptive strategies and personal experiences are incorporated into childbearing practices of ethnic minority groups. Parents of ethnic minorities have certain goals for their children, which include positive attitudes toward their own culture, being interdependent with their kin, and flexibility of cognitive skills (Brooks, 1991; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990). Most ethnic parents use similar parenting strategies as do their European American counterparts, including modeling and reinforcement. However, there are variations in the parenting patterns of the ethnic parents depending on the socioeconomic status, educational status, and the number of years they have been in the United States. McLoyd's research (1990) indicated that lower educational level and increased amounts of stress among ethnic parents greatly influence their parenting skills.

Current research findings about the parenting practices among five of the largest ethnic groups will be discussed in the following paragraphs. It is important to note that most of the research studies on minority parenting have examined parenting practices rather than attitudes or beliefs, and include parenting styles, parent's responses to crying, soothing techniques, and communication.

European American Parenting Patterns

Most of the studies on parenting are based on research done with middle-class European American families. These results are used as the "norm" to compare other types of parenting in other cultures (McKenry, Everett, Ramesaur, & Carter, 1989; Staples, & Mirande, 1980). However, the norm for middle-class European American families might not be the norm for other cultures (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). European American parents frequently follow an authoritative parenting style (Hamner & Turner, 1990), in which the parents use inductive reasoning with their children; allow choices for their children; and encourage children to be independent, honest, and open. European American parents also encourage their children· to be active explorers of their environment and problem-solve on their own. They tend to use a high rate of language with their children because verbalization is the norm in their culture. There is contradicting information about European American mothers' responses to crying. Zeskind (1983) found that European American mothers responded quickly to infant crying. Palmer (1991), on the other hand, reported that European American mothers wait a long time to respond to crying infants. These mothers used physical touch, holding, and breastfeeding as soothing techniques to calm crying infants.

African American Parenting Patterns

African American parents have a more authoritarian parenting style than the majority

population, and their perceptions of racial bias and negative stereotypes influence the parenting process. African American parents'parenting style promotes respect for the authority figure; emphasizes a work ethic, achievement, and a sense of duty and obligation to kin; and values freedom of expression and a strong religious background (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Hill, 1972; Rashid, 1985). Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, and Lewis (1990) have pointed out that inculcating the skills necessary to survive in a predominantly hostile environment is a unique characteristic of the African American parenting style. Researchers have found that African American parents are stricter in their parenting style than European Americans, requiring higher levels for accepting responsibility for self-help and care and for coping with racism and negative stereotyping (e.g., Bartz & Levine, 1978; Bell-Scott & McKenry, 1986; Hamner & Turner, 1990; Taylor et al., 1990). Inconsistencies have been reported in the literature concerning communication. Field and Widmayer (1981) found that African American parents do not have a high rate of verbal communication with their children. Hale-Benson (1986), on the other hand, reported that African American mothers had a high rate of nonverbal communication with their infants. Zeskind (1983) found that African American mothers had a slower response time to their infants' cries than the European American mothers, and they reported less distress and urgency in responding to their crying infant. The African American mothers tended to use pacifiers or physical stimulation as a response to crying.

Hispanic Parenting Patterns

The Hispanic population in the U.S. consists of several groups: Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Central and South Americans. There are conflicting reports about parenting patterns among Hispanics. Some reports indicate that Hispanic parents are permissive, while others report that they are authoritarian (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Vega (1990) reported that parenting practices among Hispanics are authoritative. Several researchers noted that Hispanic fathers now play a more nurturant role in comparison to the strict authority figure of the past (Gonzalez, 1982; Hawkes & Taylor, 1975; Zinn, 1982). Field and Widmayer (198 1) reported that Mexican American parents were less talkative with their children than European American parents.

Asian American Parenting Patterns

The Asian American ethnic group is represented by populations originating from mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Phillipines, and several other southeast Asian countries. There are many variations within this group in parenting styles based on their country of origin, their reason for immigrating to the U.S., their religious affiliation, and their number of years in the U.S. (Staples, & Mirande, 1980; Sue, & Kitano, 1973; Suzuki, 1980). Traditionally the Asian American family structure has been patriarchal; the father is the undisputed leader and all others assume subservient roles (Kitano, 1969; Sung, 1967). Some research has indicated that Asian American families are moving away from the patriarchal system, and the spouses now make joint decisions (Johnson, 1972).

Childrearing is still primarily done by the mothers in Asian American families. The mothers use permissive parenting techniques when the children are infants. However, as the

children grow older, mothers rely primarily on nonphysical disciplinary techniques, inculcating in the child a strong sense of family obligation, which continues to be reinforced as the child grows older. The mothers rely on using shame and guilt techniques to control the child's behavior whenever they deviate from their parent's expectations (Suzuki, 1980). The fathers spend a limited amount of time with the children; they usually discipline the children in the case of serious misdemeanors. Lin and Fu (1990), in their study comparing childbearing practices among Chinese, immigrant Chinese, and European American parents, found that immigrant Chinese mothers were more controlling and placed a greater emphasis on achievement than their European American counterparts. The Chinese mothers were rated higher than the immigrant Chinese and European American mothers on controlling behavior, achievement orientation, and promoting interdependence. Similar findings were reported by Julian and colleagues (1994) who found more similarities than differences in the parenting behavior perceptions of European American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American parents. They also reported that the minority parents perceived themselves as placing more emphasis on their children having self-control and achieving academic success than did their European American counterparts.

Asian Indian Parenting Patterns

Asian Indians are people who immigrated to the U.S. from the Indian subcontinent. India is made up of many peoples belonging to innumerable castes and religious groups and speaking diverse languages (Kakar, 1978; Ross, 1967). Traditionally the patriarchal joint family system (grandparents, parents, and their children living together) has been the primary source of socialization of young children (Roopnarine & Hossain, 1992). Asian Indian parents incorporate the importance of familial bonds, strong religious beliefs, and familial solidarity values into their parenting practices. However, technological advancement and migration to urban communities has resulted in fewer families living in a large joint family system. Today, many of the families are either nuclear or are nuclear families with dependents (parents, offspring, and relatives) (Roopnarine, & Hossain, 1992). Asian Indians are also rigorous believers of religious practices. This varies with the caste the family belongs to and is reflected in the way they raise their children.

The Asian Indian mother is the primary caregiver and nurturer of the children, emotionally bonding with them. The father, on the other hand, is perceived to be dominant, stem, and to be feared (Kakar, 1978; Ross, 1967). Little research has been done examining the parenting patterns of Asian Indian parents, with the exception of looking at childhood ceremonies, toilet training, weaning, and breast feeding procedures (Anandhalakshmy, 1984; Freed & Freed, 1980; Kuppuswamy, 1984; Minturn, & Hitchcock, 1966).

As can be noted with all of the mentioned immigrant populations, Asian Indian parents are faced with the issue of rearing their children in a culture very dissimilar to their own, and with trying to help them retain their cultural identity while at the same time fitting into the larger society. Although there is some research that examines minority parenting behaviors, there is a paucity of research that compares the parenting attitudes of ethnic minorities and immigrant populations and native populations. It is important to study attitudes toward parenting because prior research has clearly indicated that parenting attitudes influence parenting practices and behaviors which in turn influence children s development, and that

parenting attitudes are influenced by one's cultural group (Garcia Coll, et al., 1996; Trawick-Smith, 1997). Findings from research on ethnic minorities can be useful in planning strategies and programs to meet the needs of the growing ethnic population. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to compare the parenting attitudes of mothers of the majority population (i.e., European American), a minority native population (i.e., African American), and three minority normative populations (i.e., Asian American, Hispanic, and Asian Indian)

METHOD

Participants

The participants consisted of 182 mothers from five ethnic backgrounds. There were 52 European Americans, 43 Asians Americans, 33 African Americans, 31 Hispanics, and 23 Asian Indians. All the participants belonged to the middle or upper-middle socioeconomic class. The mothers were 19 years or older and had children who were 3-5 years of age attending preschools in the southern and western parts of the United States. The Hispanic, Asian American, and Asian Indian mothers had immigrated to the U.S. within the three years prior to data collection.. The European American and African American mothers were native to the U.S. All participants had at least a high school degree.

Instruments and Procedure

The parenting attitudes of the mothers were measured using the Adolescent-Adult Parenting Inventory (AAPI, Bavolek, 1984). The AAPI, originally designed to identify parents who are at-risk for abuse or neglect, is a 32-item assessment of parenting and child rearing practices standardized on 2,000 adults and 6,500 adolescents (Bavolek, 1990; Bavolek, Kline, & McLaughlin, 1979; Stone, 1980). The AAPI has four subscales: (a) Reversing Parent-Child Family Roles (Role Reversal), (b) Lack of Empathic Awareness of Children's Needs (Empathy); (c) Inappropriate Developmental Expectations of Children (Developmental Expectations), and (d) Strong Parental Beliefs in the Use of Corporal Punishment (Corporal Punishment).

The Role Reversal subscale (8 items) measures the parent's use of the child to gratify his/her needs (e.g., "Children should be the main source of comfort and care for their parents"). The Empathy subscale (8 items) measures the parent's ability to empathize with and identify the children's needs (e.g., "Parents who are sensitive to their children's feelings and moods often spoil their children"). The Developmental Expectations subscale (6 items) measures the parent's expectations of their children's capability that might be beyond what the children are capable of doing at the age (e.g., "Children should be expected to verbally express themselves before the age of one year"). The Corporal Punishment subscale (10 items) measures the parent's belief that spanking, hitting, and slapping will prove beneficial to the children in terms of teaching them right from wrong and helping them develop strong and sound characteristics (e.g.,"Parents have the responsibility to spank their children when they misbehave").

The 32 items are answered on a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Low scores on the subscales indicate appropriate expectations,

empathy, attitudes toward corporal punishment, and an absence of role reversal. High scores on the subscales indicate inappropriate expectations, empathy, attitudes toward corporal punishment., and belief in role reversal. Bavolek (1990) found the AAPI to have an internal reliability of .70 to .86. The internal consistency showed appropriate levels of reliability for each of the subscales (Expectations = .70, Empathy = .75, Corporal Punishment = .8 1, Role Reversal = .82), and test-retest reliability of the inventory showed an adequate level of stability over a week's period (.76) (Bavolek, 1990).

The letters explaining the research project and consent forms were sent to the directors of the participating preschools, who distributed them to the mothers of all the preschool children. Letters were sent to 279 mothers; 182 mothers consented to participate (65%). The AAPI was disseminated to the consenting mothers. After answering the AAPI questionnaires the mothers returned them to the preschool directors who returned them to the researchers.

RESULTS

A one-way (5: cultural groups) ANOVA was performed on each of the 4 subscale scores to determine if the five cultural groups differed in their parental attitudes. The means and standard deviations for the subscales of the AAPI are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Mean and Standard of Mothers' Parental Attitudes

Ethnicity	Inappropriate Expectations		Empathy		Corporal Punishment		Role Reversal	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Eu. Americans	-8.87	2.86	-11.71	4.29	-11.38	6.36	-10.96	4.72
Af. American	-6.39	3.69	-7.12	5.75	-4.21	7.61	-4.39	6.15
Hispanics	-5.52	4.13	-6.19	5.17	-9.19	6.17	-6.45	5.7
Asians	-4.26	4.71	-2.35	6.13	-2.51	7.56	-1.7	8.53
Asian-Indians	-5.20	4.6	-5.8	7.7	-7.0	10.0	-3.6	7.54

The results indicated that the five cultural groups differed in their parental attitudes for each of the 4 subscales: Role Reversal, $F(5,176)$ 10.78, $p < .0001$; Empathy, $F(5,176) = 13.22$, $p < .0001$; Inappropriate Expectations, $F(5,176)$ 7.36, $p < .0001$, and Corporal Punishment, $F(5,176)$ 8.64, $p < .0001$. Post-hoc Tukey tests for ethnic group differences in the parental attitude subscale scores yielded significant results ($p < .05$ and $p < .01$) for 16 of the 40 pairwise comparisons. In summary, Asian American, Asian Indian, and African American mothers tended to reverse roles with their children more and to have lower empathetic awareness of their children's needs than their European American and Hispanic counterparts. Asian American, Asian Indian, and Hispanic mothers had less appropriate expectations of their children than European American and African American mothers. Asian American and African American mothers favored the use of corporal punishment more than their European American and Hispanic counterparts.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the present study indicate cultural variations in parental attitudes towards childrearing among the five ethnic groups of mothers. Overall, the European American mothers seemed to understand what to expect of their children at each developmental level, empathized with their children's needs, did not believe that the use of corporal punishment would help to discipline or instill a sense of right and wrong in their children, and did not believe in "living their lives through their children." It is not surprising that the European American mothers tended to express higher levels of "appropriateness" for the four attitudes because the instrument used to assess the attitudes was developed and based upon research and theory from western culture and normed with European American samples. We would therefore expect their expressed attitudes, relative to the expressed attitudes of the minority parents, to be rated more positively by the measure.

In discussing the attitudinal and behavioral differences among minority and majority parents, it is important to remember that attitudes and practices that deviate from those found among the white middle-class mainstream are not pathological, deviant, or deficient, but may be legitimate and valuable for the cultural minority group (Garcia Coll, Crnic, Lamberty, Wasik, Jenkins, Garcia, & McAdoo, 1996; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996). It is also important to remember that within all ethnic groups, there is wide variation among parenting practices and attitudes.

The four minority ethnic groups in general showed lower "appropriateness" in the four subscales of parenting attitudes. Drawing from the prior research findings on differences between the ethnic groups' family structures and processes, and adaptive strategies we may hypothesize about the antecedents of the differences we found among their parental attitudes.

Asian American, Asian Indian, and African American mothers tended to reverse roles with their children and had lower empathetic awareness of their children's needs than the European American and Hispanic mothers. The Asian American, Asian Indian and African American mothers often live in multigenerational families in one household (Beck & Beck, 1989; Roopnarine & Hossain, 1992; Stevenson, Chen, & Lee, 1992), and the mothers may experience role reversal within their daily lives while caring for their aging parents and relatives. Therefore, they may similarly expect their children to do the same for them. These results are in conjunction with the adaptive strategy of family extendedness and role flexibility which the ethnic mothers encourage their children to inculcate. In other words, the ethnic minority mothers in their parenting practices strongly profess the importance of the extended family in terms of caring and supporting each other. In the multigenerational homes where the Asian American, Asian Indian, and African American mothers are used to living, others in addition to the mother are available to care for the children. Because of the large support network, the mothers may be less aware of the needs of their children and less responsive to fulfilling those needs. While these are plausible explanations for the findings in this study, they are speculative at this point. Information concerning multigenerational living patterns of the ethnic groups were gleaned from the literature. Mothers in our study were not asked about their living arrangements. Future researchers should investigate the residential living patterns of the ethnic groups when studying the parenting practices/behaviors of ethnic families.

The immigrant mothers (Asian American, Asian Indian, and Hispanic) had greater inappropriate expectations of their children than the nonimmigrant mothers (European American and African American). This is a particularly interesting finding in light of recent discussions about the influence of culture on children's development and the importance of interpreting development within the cultural context (Bowman, & Stott, 1994; Cannella, 1998; DeaterDeckard et al., 1996; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Hence it is not surprising that the European American and African American mothers native to the U.S. viewed developmental expectations for their children more similarly than the immigrant mothers. The role of adaptive strategy (i.e. biculturalism) in the parenting process of immigrant mothers, in addition to them having higher expectations of their children achieving their developmental tasks, may promote the inappropriate expectaions that these mothers have. Additionally, the instrument used in the present study was based upon research and theory from western culture. Developmental expectations for children of different ages vary from one culture to another; what is viewed as an appropriate expectation in one culture might be viewed as delayed or accelerated development in another culture. The interface between culture and development increases the challenge for researchers in pursuing further avenues of research and in interpreting their findings (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Ogbu, 1993).

The results of the present study also indicated that Asian American and African American mothers supported the use of corporal punishment more than the Hispanic and European American mothers. This finding lends support to the idea that European American mothers tend to use an authoritative parenting style as noted by several scholars (e.g., Brooks, 1991; Hammner & Turner, 1990; Spencer, 1990). There is a lack of consensus in the literature about the parenting practices of African American and Asian American parents (e.g., Julian et al., 1994; Kelley, Power, and Wimbush, 1992; Suzuki, 1980). As Deater-Deckard and colleagues (1996) have suggested, minority parents may believe they have not adequately fulfilled their role as parents if they do not use strict physical discipline with their children.

The results of the present study suggest that there are cultural variations in the parenting attitudes of mothers belonging to various ethnic groups living in the U.S. However, the interpretation of these results is limited because parenting is influenced by several factors, including variability among individuals and subgroups within each cultural group and the culture of the majority group.

It is important for educators, practitioners, and teachers to keep in mind the diverse nature of the parenting process when working with families from various cultures. Several of the ethnic immigrant families do not often seek professional help when there is discord or disharmony in the family. When these family groups do consult professionals it would help the families if the therapists and practitioners had prior knowledge about the parenting attitudes and practices of the different ethnic groups. This will create a more secure atmosphere for the ethnic parents to talk about several issues that are not openly discussed among their families. Additionally using observational techniques to explore cross-cultural parenting behaviors of each of the subgroups represented in the ethnic populations would greatly increase our understanding of parenting processes and would assist professionals in planning programs to meet the needs of diverse families.

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