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Economic Stress Among Low Income Latino Adolescent Fathers: An Application of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model

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Abstract

Latino youth are more likely to live under the poverty line and to become adolescent parents. Although research exists examining adolescent mothers, less is known about adolescent fathers, particularly Latino adolescent fathers. Much of what does exist uses a deficit lens, as opposed to one of strength and resilience. Although adolescent fathers sometimes do struggle in their transition to fatherhood, it is critical to understand the positive ways in which they adapt. The present study uses in-depth interviews and applies the vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model to understand parental adaptation processes among a sample of low-income Latino adolescent fathers ($N = 11$). Despite economic vulnerability, including low income and limited resources, fathers' aspirations to provide for their children served as an adaptive mechanism. These aspirations were influenced by the quality of their relationship with the mother of their children as well as by cultural influences from their families-of-origin. Findings indicated the importance of a positive, holistic family experience that includes cultural notions of familism. By identifying the processes by which adolescent fathers experience vulnerabilities, stress, and adaptation to those stressors, it is possible to develop and implement culturally responsive and strengths-based services and policies to better support their transition, including those related to job readiness, relationship education, and family involvement.

Keywords Adolescent parents, Fatherhood, Latino studies, Poverty, Thematic analysis

In 2017, over 194,000 children were born to adolescent parents, with Latino adolescents reporting a birth rate more than two times that of white adolescents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). Adolescent parenthood is often correlated with adverse socioeconomic consequences for both parents and children, such as decreased rates of school completion, increased risk of unemployment, and greater dependence on welfare (Johansen et al., 2020). Moreover, Latino youth in general are more likely to experience economic distress than whites, even when they are not a parent (Cedeño et al., 2020; Murphey et al., 2014). Specifically, when compared to other ethnicities, U.S. Latino families are more likely to experience negative socioeconomic outcomes, which are often related to social immobility and unequal opportunities (Macartney et al., 2013). In addition, over 60% of all Latino fathers live two times below the national poverty line (Karberg et al., 2017). These income inequalities and accompanying challenges have been associated with difficult environments for Latino pregnant and parenting adolescents (Cedeño et al., 2021; Williams & Rueda, 2016). However, researchers have highlighted the benefits of conceptualizing adolescent parenthood using a strengths-based approach that recognizes adolescent fathers' ability to adapt in the face of stress and thrive in the context of economic vulnerabilities (Conn et al., 2018; Florsheim & Ngu, 2006; Williams & Rueda, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model to understand Latino adolescent fathers' adaptation to fatherhood within the context of the economic vulnerability and parental stress they experience.

Literature Review

Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) Model

The VSA model is a useful theoretical framework to explain how enduring vulnerabilities, acute stressors (i.e., fatherhood), and adaptation account for variability in adolescent fathers' experiences. The VSA model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) explains how processes related to relationship and family functioning develop via indicators such as quality (Totenhagen et al., 2018), conflict (Williams & Rueda, 2016), and stability (Cutrona et al., 2011). Specifically, accumulated stressful experiences,

particularly when individual and couple adaptive processes are poor, inhibit relationship quality and family stability, while the reverse similarly applies. The VSA model posits that couples' experiences are influenced by a combination of each individual partner's traits and background characteristics and that these interact dynamically with life stressors, including those experienced by the couple. Adaptation occurs via coping strategies and behaviors at both the individual and couple level.

Although the VSA model has been used to examine stress and adaptation during the transition to parenthood (Trillingsgaard et al., 2014), much of the early research has focused on predominately white, adult couples. However, more recently, it has been applied to research on diverse families, including Latino families (Trail et al., 2012). Therefore, we believe the VSA model is appropriate to this study because it allows for the incorporation of complex factors in attending to relationship outcomes. In this study, we discuss how low SES among Latino families, along with the stress of unplanned adolescent pregnancy and financial goals, act together to influence the relationships that emerge among adolescent parents. In addition, this study builds upon the limited, yet promising, literature using the VSA model to understand diverse youths' relationships (Williams & Rueda, 2016), here, by focusing on Latino adolescent fathers' adaptation to parenthood.

Enduring Vulnerabilities: Economic Conditions

According to Doherty et al. (1998), "one aspect of responsible fathering, that of economic support, is nearly universally expected of fathers by their cultures" (p. 287); thus, highlighting how fathering is more vulnerable to contextual factors such as employment and economic conditions. As a result, because adolescent fathers are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic consequences (Johansen et al., 2020; Karberg et al., 2017), they are less likely to be viewed as responsible fathers. Moreover, low economic conditions, such as employment barriers and financial stability challenges, are an enduring vulnerability that have been linked to increases in relationship conflict and, in turn, decreases in relationship satisfaction (Maisel & Karney, 2012). Although these links are documented among white adult couples, they are also important to examine among Latino adolescent fathers who are often born into

a low socioeconomic status (SES; Assini-Meytin et al., 2019; CDC, 2014).

These fathers are also at an increased risk for experiencing future economic vulnerability because they are less likely to complete their education (Mollborn, 2010). Although adolescent fathers who are closer to completing their education before becoming parents are more likely to graduate (Futris et al., 2012), this is not always feasible for Latino adolescent fathers (Assini-Meytin et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important for these youth to have opportunities to complete their education when they face challenges to their financial futures (Futris et al., 2012; Mollborn, 2010).

Despite the importance of equal opportunities to complete an education, Latino adolescents endure obstacles, such as fewer resources than other students (Schneider et al., 2006). Access to these resources, including computers and personal areas to work on class assignments, increases the likelihood that adolescent fathers will be able to complete their education (Futris et al., 2012). Unfortunately, those in low SES households might be unable to afford these vital resources. Promisingly, however, fathers' educational attainment might be bolstered by family support (Futris et al., 2012) and culturally responsive interventions that examine communication, in particular for Latinos (Concha et al., 2016).

Stressful Event: Fatherhood

Despite the prevalence of fatherhood among Latino adolescents (Karberg et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2012), most research on Latino fathers has focused on adults. This leaves a gap in understanding how to serve adolescent fathers (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014) who face numerous stressors that come with having a baby early in life (Fagan et al., 2007; Holmes et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2012). In addition to the economic stressors previously identified, first time fathers also experience postpartum depression (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010). Lee et al. (2012) found that the adolescent fathers in their sample, about a quarter of whom were Latino, were more likely than their adult counterparts to experience depression and/or anxiety. One possible explanation for this finding is that adolescent parents are more likely to experience higher rates of co-parenting conflict compared to adult co-parents (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Fagan & Lee, 2011), which has been linked to an increased likelihood of depression (Hunt et al., 2015). Moreover,

young fathers often report feeling unprepared for fatherhood and feel less able to parent (Holmes et al., 2017), which might be associated with higher rates of depression or anxiety.

Adaptation

As parenting stress has been linked to decreased paternal involvement for adolescent fathers (Fagan et al., 2007), it is important to identify how younger fathers can adapt to promote greater involvement, potentially through the cultural salience of family life. Although understudied compared to white fathers, Latino fathers are often active parents who play an important role in their children's lives (Cabrera & Bradley, 2012; Concha et al., 2016). In fact, even though about one-quarter of Latino fathers are nonresidential (Karberg et al., 2017), they tend to be more involved in their children's lives than their white counterparts (Cabrera & Bradley, 2012), indicating the need to include both intact adolescent parent couples as well as separated co-parents. Moreover, despite being mischaracterized as hypermasculine, unemotional, or uninvolved (Glass & Owen, 2010), Latino fathers are often present and nurturing (Karberg et al., 2017; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2016).

Despite the challenges of acute stressors on enduring vulnerabilities, adolescent fathers engage in adaptive processes to overcome these stressors and work toward achieving family stability (Conn et al., 2018). For instance, some adolescent fathers have reported entering the workforce in order to provide for their child, thus often changing prior goals (e.g., education) and routines (e.g., sport practice, extracurricular activities; Futris et al., 2010). Previous researchers have also found that Latino adolescent fathers often adapt to fatherhood stressors through active collaboration in establishing a positive co-parenting relationship (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014) and/or with the help of their families-of-origin (Paschal et al., 2011). *Familismo*, a cultural trait characterized by strong filial bonds and family centrality in Latino families (Sotomayor-Peterson et al., 2012), might help Latino adolescent fathers adapt to parenthood given that it is documented as a resource in the transition to parenthood among low-income Latina mothers (Luecken et al., 2009). Below is a more detailed exploration of adaptation through changing goals, co-parental relationships, and familismo.

Occupational and Educational Goals

Education and employment have been shown to be important in the development of stability and future life success (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). Indeed, research on adult Latino fathers has suggested that those who have a higher level of education and are employed tend to be more involved in their children and families' lives (Cabrera & Bradley, 2012). Despite the stigma adolescent fathers often face in school settings (Hall et al., 2014), social workers can advocate for structural supports in adolescent fathers' educational environments to foster their success (McLaughlin, 2014). Further, although almost 90% of Latino fathers in general are employed, many adolescent fathers struggle in finding jobs (Karberg et al., 2017). To achieve their professional goals, many young fathers express a desire for formal resources (e.g., job referrals, job readiness or vocational training; Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014) in ways that social workers can facilitate through adult mentorship (Kiselica, 2008) and family support (Futris et al., 2012).

Co-parental Relationships

Another potential adaptive mechanism is the father's relationship with the mother of his child (Mollborn & Jacobs, 2015; Varga et al., 2017). Co-parenting is defined as the way parents work together in their roles and includes their transition to parenthood (Feinberg, 2002), which often brings challenges to adolescents in particular. Although co-parenting is multi-faceted, we centered on the relationship component, given the VSA model focuses on couples' relationships. At any age, the birth of a child is often associated with lowered relationship satisfaction (Lawrence et al., 2008). However, one study of adolescent fathers, one-third of whom were Latino, found that a strong relationship with their child's mother was linked to a strong relationship with their child (Fagan & Lee, 2011). Although romantic relationships or positive co-parenting interactions might be beneficial for Latino (Cabrera & Bradley, 2012) and adolescent parents (Mallett, et al., 2015), they often have a heightened potential for conflict, including relationship violence (Toews & Yazedjian, 2014; Williams & Rueda, 2016). Conversely, when adolescent fathers perceive their romantic and co-parenting relationships positively, they might be more likely to be involved with their child's lives (Varga et al., 2017). As such, building positive relationships, whether it be romantic, co-

parental, or both, is important in terms of the fathers' adaptive processes.

Familismo

Familismo is a cultural value and protective factor for Latino youth that centers on family connectivity (Updegraff et al., 2012). Prior applications of the VSA model among Latino adults have indicated that a strong sense of ethnic identity can mediate the negative impacts of external stressors on relationship quality (Trail et al., 2012). Latino adolescent parents who adhere more strongly to cultural values, including *familismo*, are less likely to engage in relationship conflict than those who do not (Updegraff et al., 2012). Moreover, Latino adolescent parents report feeling more positively about having a child than adolescents in other racial ethnic groups, which has been attributed to the value placed on family (Ryan et al., 2005).

Similarly, adolescent fathers who receive family-of-origin support tend to have better outcomes, including more involvement with their child (Fagan et al., 2007). Extended family might underscore the importance of providing for and spending time with their children, as well as give support to the fathers themselves (Mollborn, 2010). Parental support can also help the father achieve his educational goals (Futris et al., 2012). These supports can allow fathers to attain a higher level of education and the opportunities associated with it, which can facilitate adaptation to stress through goal attainment. As young fathers often feel more unprepared than young mothers (Holmes et al., 2017), family support might be key in mitigating stressful feelings. However, there are few studies that consider these components when focusing on Latino adolescent fathers.

The present study seeks to understand how Latino adolescent fathers adapt to fatherhood. In particular, we utilized the VSA model to guide our themes centering on Latino adolescent fathers' vulnerabilities, the acute stressors of parenting, and adaptation amidst vulnerable economic conditions. The guiding research question was: *How do Latino adolescent fathers adapt to the stress of fatherhood in the context of enduring economic vulnerability?*

Methodology

Recruitment

The present study is a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014). The data were collected as part of a larger study designed to examine the lived experiences of adolescent fathers and the relationships they had with the mothers of their children. The original study was conducted by two of the current authors focused on adolescent fathers' perceptions of and experiences with teen dating violence (Bermea & Toews, 2018). Discussions indicated additional relationship and family processes beyond teen dating violence. We were specifically sensitized to how the adolescent fathers adapted to the stress of fatherhood, indicating a need for subsequent analysis on these processes.

Fathers were originally recruited from a relationship education program for pregnant and parenting adolescents that served eight high schools in urban cities ($n = 4$ schools) and suburban towns ($n = 4$ schools) in a Southwestern state. The program was facilitated by trained staff and was administered throughout the school year, with relationship education given in the fall and financial education offered in the spring. The facilitators also offered case management for the parents.

In the spring of 2015, following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the program facilitators at each high school individually approached the fathers to ask if they would like to participate in a study concerning their relationship with their child's mother. All fathers who were enrolled in the program ($N = 21$) were invited to participate. Nine fathers declined to participate due to prescheduled extracurricular and parental appointments; just over half ($N = 12$) were able to participate.

Participants

The racial breakdown of the original sample was Latino ($n = 10$), non-Hispanic Black, ($n = 1$), and Biracial ($n = 1$), with the Biracial father holding a Latino identity. To best target the unique experiences of Latino adolescent fathers, only data from the Latino and Biracial fathers were analyzed in the present study ($N = 11$). The fathers ranged in age from 16 to 18 years old ($M = 17.73$ years). In order to improve the fidelity of our data collection, data were collected from fathers who were diverse in terms of relationship status, length of relationship, and age of child (Levitt et al., 2017).

Specifically, eight of the fathers were still in a relationship with the mother of their child at the time of the interview and, in total, their relationships ranged from nine months to four years ($M = 33$ months). This average excluded one father who did not provide a clear relationship length with the mother of his child; however, their relationship was intact at the time of the interview. Moreover, the fathers' children ranged in age from 1.5 to 13 months ($M = 6.8$ months). All fathers received government benefits and 73% ($n = 8$) received free or reduced lunch, which are indicative of their low SES. Interviews lasted from 13 to 95 min ($M = 43$ min). Fathers were given pseudonyms and any potential identifiers were redacted. All fathers received a \$25 gift card incentive.

Procedures

All interviews took place during the school day at the high school the fathers attended. The data were collected via audio recordings and included interviewer notes (i.e., memos). Data were transcribed verbatim by the second author using Microsoft Word and the documents were uploaded into N-Vivo software for analysis. To protect confidentiality, program facilitators signed fathers out from class so it would appear to be a normative part of case management. The father met the interviewer, a Latina woman, in a private room on campus. We chose a Latina woman to conduct the interviews because we believed she would be able to gather the richest data given her position (i.e., age (near-peer), in-group membership), skills, and experiences (Levitt et al., 2017). Specifically, adolescent fathers in prior studies have requested female interviewers as they “were not used to being asked to express themselves and talk about their feelings” and felt more comfortable doing so with a woman (Wilkes et al., 2012, p. 182). The interviewer was a research-focused master's student trained in interviewing adolescent parents, and her field experience and training with this population bolstered rapport and sensitivity during data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Fathers were ensured they could end the interview at any time. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol because it allowed the structure necessary to explore the lived experiences of adolescent fathers and the relationships they had with the mothers of their children, as well as the freedom to digress and “follow the interviewee” to explore topics raised during the interview process that the interviewer might not have

considered (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 13). Sample prompts included: “Tell me about the relationship with the mother of your children,” “All couples argue, it’s part of being in a relationship. What kinds of things do/did you fight about?” and “What is your relationship with your family (of origin) like now?” However, adapting to parental experiences were salient in the fathers’ discussions and are the basis for the present study.

Thematic Analysis

The first two authors used thematic analysis to explore patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014) via a hybrid process of inductive and deductive analyses (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). First, they undertook inductive analysis through a data-driven approach, without immersion in the literature or a specific research question in mind. The coders independently immersed themselves in the data and took notes on preliminary thoughts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They then developed broad general codes from particularly salient discussions centering around the fathers’ SES and their relationships with the mothers of their children.

At this point in qualitative research, coding can diverge into either *data driven* or *theory driven* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the adolescent fathers’ narratives were reflective of the VSA model, the coders independently compared the inductive findings with this theoretical orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this manner, we were sensitized to an existing theoretical framework and used this framework to analyze our data, thus increasing the fidelity of our study by managing our perspectives as well as maximizing our study’s utility in achieving our goal (Levitt et al., 2017). This is common in qualitative research and aids in the further refinement and development of existing theories (Padgett, 2008). Although the VSA is a relatively new model, it aligns with our research because it allows for a developmental view on relationships while incorporating the strengths and complexities of previous theories. The coding team then used this theory (i.e., the VSA model) to guide a deductive analysis by identifying posterior patterns within the data (Gilgun, 2012). This method of examining the data through the VSA model allowed the coders to uncover richer nuances, as noted across the subthemes. For instance, they were able to take a strengths-based approach by highlighting specific adaptive processes and the importance of cultural factors (e.g.,

familismo) while understanding the vulnerabilities and stressors within the relationship, among other themes, such as the recognition of financial hardships within the father's new parental role.

This dual approach allowed coders to inductively identify themes from preliminary coding iterations and then narrow themes deductively via application of the VSA model. We followed the steps proposed by Braun and Clark (2006) which consist of: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. The coders focused on *con- tent* over *quantity*, giving weight and therefore exploring in greater depth the fathers' extensive descriptions of their individual experiences (e.g., economic hardship). This may be opposed to a specific number count within themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We name themes in ways that reflect both the model as well as the fathers' experiences through the use of in vivo quotes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness

Given the coding team used the VSA model to guide our deductive analysis, the coders were aware of the potential for bias (i.e., "trying to fit" within a preconceived framework; Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83) and cognizant of the importance of ensuring the trustworthiness of the data collected and interpretations. Thus, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness were followed—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility of the findings (i.e., the believability of interpretations to those outside the setting and those within) was achieved through analyst triangulation (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, the first two authors used analyst triangulation by coding separately then meeting to determine consensus (Creswell, 2014). The third author, who has used the VSA model in applications on Latino adolescent fatherhood (Bermea & Toews, 2018), reviewed the coding as a whole. Meetings between researchers and comparisons of emergent data patterns assisted in achieving consensus on their interpretation of the experiences of Latino adolescent fathers. When contradictions emerged, coders had conversations as to the logic behind their interpretations, referencing data, the VSA model, and relevant research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the fourth author had extensive

experience in the field of study (Creswell, 2014) and was able to determine if the interpretation was credible based on her observation of the lived experiences of adolescent parents. Here, we provided an in-depth description of our methods and data exemplars to bolster transferability to other studies (Bowen, 2008).

For transferability the team provided a description of the phenomenon being studied to facilitate the opportunity for other researchers to develop working research questions and hypotheses for future inquiry (Bowen, 2008). The dependability of findings was established through an electronic audit trail over the course of analysis in which the researchers kept memos of data collection and the coding process which were referenced throughout analysis (Creswell, 2014). Confirmability was established through comparison of findings to existing literature examining parental stress in similar contexts (Creswell, 2014).

Findings

This study sought to better understand Latino adolescent fathers' adaptive processes to the stress of parenthood in low SES conditions using the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). This model posits that adaptive processes can only be understood in the context of long-standing vulnerabilities (i.e., both individual and interpersonal) and stressors. Findings elucidated fathers' enduring vulnerabilities through *economic vulnerability*, which related to family relationships and their emerging fatherhood, both before and after becoming parents. *Stress*, via fatherhood, was not a standalone theme, but rather was present throughout each theme. The next theme highlighted *adaptation*, which were comprised of three distinct adaptive mechanisms the fathers used in attempt to achieve relationship and family stability. The first was *adaptation through goals*, which tended to be through jobs to provide for their new family. The second was *adaptation through co-parenting relationships*, wherein interactions with their child's mother influenced the fathers' adaptation. Lastly, the fathers engaged in *adaptation through enhanced family-of-origin support* or *familismo*. Importantly, adaptation processes acted together (e.g., support from family-of-origin during co-parenting challenges).

Economic Vulnerability

The influence of low SES was illustrated in the two sub- themes below, as both related to family relationships (Eco- nomic Vulnerability in Family-of-Origin), and fatherhood (Enduring Economic Vulnerability During the Transition to Fatherhood).

Economic Vulnerability in Family-of-Origin

The economic vulnerability of the Latino adolescent fathers in our study was evident in their family-of-origin. Participants noted they had experienced enduring financial stress during their childhoods, even before becoming fathers. They also reported how financial stress was related to monetary struggles growing up, fights due to low income conditions, and how providing for their children financially was important for family well-being and being successful fathers. One instance was when Beto explained how his family-of-origin often lacked a steady income, making provision of necessities difficult. From a young age, he undertook informal work to support his mother and younger siblings:

I was just like, well, I'm gonna make some money so I can put some, help my mom put some dinner on the table. And basically, that's what I did. Like, I made the money for dinner; my mom paid the bills.

Similarly, in describing his experience living with his girlfriend's family while she was pregnant, Daniel said: "There was nothing inside [the] fridge. There was nothing to eat."

Enduring Economic Vulnerability During the Transition to Fatherhood

Following the birth of their children, fathers spoke about continued low-income conditions that made parenting stressful. Efrain explained that he struggled to find a job that would increase his ability to provide basic necessities for his child (e.g., diapers, childcare). He offered: "... I need to get a job. And I've been trying to get a job. I'd take any job. 'Cause my mom always is on me about my job, or get- ting a job, like 24/7." Cesar similarly explained the stress of how he and his child's mother would argue about not being able to afford childcare: "We usually fight sometimes about money. Like paying for daycare, and for gas, and to save." He also noted they would argue about

whether his daughter “needs clothes or something.” The fathers’ discussions indicated the bidirectionality of economic vulnerability with regard to the influence of individual stress on co-parenting. The couple’s frustration and argument as a result of being financially vulnerable were challenges to their positive adaptation.

Adaptation

The fathers engaged in multiple strategies to adapt to the stress of their transition to fatherhood. These strategies were illustrated in the subthemes as both instrumental (Adaptation through Goals) and interpersonal strategies (Adaptation through Co-Parenting Relationships and Adaptation through Familismo).

Adaptation Through Goals

Fathers described how they had to adapt their goals and aspirations for their future after becoming a father. To illustrate, Beto recalled that before meeting the mother of his child: “I wanted to join the military when I got out of high school.” He also stated: “I was gonna be a soccer player; I was gonna freaking exceed [at] everything.” However, his personal expectations were hindered as he had to adjust his goals to adapt to the acute stressor of fatherhood within the enduring vulnerability of low socioeconomic conditions. Often, these goals centered on the perception of fathers as providers, which might have been influenced by Latino gender roles regarding the importance of family provision. Nico, who was also separated from the mother of his child, shared the following: “I would just send her the child support and then I’ll give her some money because she wasn’t working.” In this quote we see how Nico’s partial adaptation came in the form of meeting his new economic obligation. Jacob explained how a fathering role in his family meant being a provider and making sacrifices to work more hours. When his own father told him to be responsible, he recalled blame for a lack of safe sexual practices. He also described how the transition to parenthood meant that he needed to grow up quickly:

[My dad] was like, “Well I told you to, you know, wrap your shit up [i.e., wear a condom].” He was like, “You didn’t do it... so you gotta be a man.” And I was already working so it was just, I had to put more hours in and, you know, I got out

of football... started working more, started saving up money.

Here, gender roles influenced how the participants adapted to fatherhood do to familial and co-parental (e.g., father as provider) expectations. For instance, Luis, who was still in a relationship with his child's mother, described how, ideally, "I [would] work and, you know, provide for her. Me, her, and the baby. And she just stays home and cleans." Economic vulnerability influenced the fathers' initial idealistic aspirations to more immediate adaptation goals in order to respond to basic needs for a new child.

Adaptation Through Co-parenting Relationships

The fathers' relationship with their child's mother was also critical to adaptation. The VSA model notes that relationships are bidirectional and can promote adaptation or further stress. Within this subtheme, fathers explained how their relationships improved when they both prioritized the importance of providing a safe and nurturing home for their child. However, they also sometimes experienced conflictual relationships with the mother of their child, which hindered adaptation.

Relationship Quality Facilitating Adaptation Luis explained how the transition to parenthood led him and his child's mother to resolve their past differences: "We found out she was pregnant...she was a couple months into her pregnancy and we worked things out. We talked a lot [about] being a family and giving our child a family." He later shared how, after the birth of their child, "We don't fight as often or we fight rarely." Efrain echoed a similar sentiment, "We kinda see eye to eye, I think. We don't disagree about much things... Like, we kinda argue but, I mean, where it's not real arguments [i.e., escalating fights] but just disagreements." Another example emerged when José was asked how he felt about his partner: "I trust her more. So it's just, I trust her with everything," adding, "like, I leave her at my house while I'm not there with my parents." The closeness of José's partner with his family is an example of how *familismo* provides close ties between two families that are united by the process of merging families.

Relationship Quality Hindering Adaptation On the other hand, fathers sometimes

perceived their child's mother as a hindrance to their adaptation. For example, some described how difficult it was to achieve stability when they experienced conflict with their co-parent. Jacob explained how the lack of communication between them contributed to arguments: "I would say something and either she took it the wrong way... or she misunderstood...It was just vice versa with me as well. So, I mean, I guess it was more on the communication part where we had issues." Beto gave a more extreme example of negative communication with his co- parent: "I walk into the conversation cautious; I step around the glass the whole time and then she's sitting here slinging the sledgehammer at the glass." Efrain also gave an example of how he felt when the mother of his child was stressed: "[She says] I'm not trying hard enough [to find a job]. And I got mad and I was like, 'oh yeah, I am trying!'... I've put in fifteen applications already." Efrain found it difficult to adapt to fatherhood without the support of his partner, highlighting how adaptive processes were hindered when communication was poor between parents.

Additionally, some fathers described traditional roles as hindering their co-parenting adaptation; specifically, they discussed how culturally, the mother is viewed as the primary caregiver while the father is seen as the provider. In turn, they were given less access to their child when they were arguing with the mother. Santiago described his girl- friend's threats when they argued, describing "that she'll leave and take my daughter." When asked how this made him feel, he replied: "Well, mad, sad, I guess." He added, "I just shut up because I don't want that. Yeah. I don't react." Beto similarly noted:

She wants me to do everything her way...But the thing is, like, I want things to go my way too. But I don't tell her anything. Because I know that it'll cause us to fight ...I'm here for my son. I'm not here for her at all. And so, I'd rather just not fight with her so that way I can get my son when I want to.

Antonio also emphasized the importance of maintaining the co-parenting relationship:

I get to see my son, so I could say it's a good relation- ship. Cause like, before all this, like, we had got into an argument and I hardly see my son. But now we talk to each other and all that, [so] I get to see my son more and that's all that matters.

It should be noted that the fathers described *both* types of relationship qualities, suggesting that adolescent parents' interaction types are not distinct. Rather, it is the *processes* through which these adolescent fathers navigated their co-parenting relationships that was important.

Adaptation Through Familismo

Many of the fathers spoke about their families-of-origin as an important source of support for their adaptation. Familismo differs conceptually from adapting through co-parenting relationships as families-of-origin were not always involved with the co-parents as a couple; rather, they provided support to parenting specifically. This subtheme was broken down by the fathers' descriptions of emotional and parenting support, indicating how familismo helped family-level, rather than only couple-level, adaptation. As such, familismo served as a way to promote adaptivity as an additional support even when couple-level adaptive supports were not present.

Emotional Support Fathers described experiences of family unity and feeling comfortable with and trusting their parents and other family members. Santiago, despite struggling to trust his partner, was able to rely on his mother: "I just trust her, I know she's there for me, you know?" Sometimes family support reflected gender roles (i.e., men as providers), as the fathers described how, "I can talk to my parents about anything...I'm mostly like a mamma's boy, 'cause, my dad, I rarely see him [because] he's a hard worker. Like, he's a very, very hard worker." Jacob also shared how his mother offered emotional support: "I guess you could say she's supportive as well, like really supportive. But I mean she [will offer advice] more as if...she's been in that position before, like she's had that issue [that I have had] before." David described his aunt's support as a role model:

The person I talk to [is] my aunt [the] most. My aunt's kinda like the mom role model. Even before she had kids, when she was like eighteen, she graduated; she had all her credits by the time her junior year came around.

Parenting Support Family support in parenting was a second dimension the

fathers described. However, this support was not without its own challenges for their parents. Santiago stated of his mother: “She’s been through a lot, helping me with my baby.” Nico elaborated on this support while discussing how important it was for his mother to care for his baby while he was working, mostly due to the high cost of childcare and his child support debt: “I’ll be at work and my mom watches her.” When describing his week of balancing work, school, and co-parenting after they had broken up, he stated:

I’m leaving during 7th period to go get [my daughter]. Then I have to drop her off to my mom and then go to work. And then I’m gonna get her that morning...and then Sunday I’m gonna have to take her back to the mom [of my child].

In this quote we can understand how Nico’s life has changed, where he can find little time between school and fatherhood. He further noted how both emotional and parenting support were often intertwined in this relationship with his mother: “I talk to my mom... she helps me with my money, she puts it in a bank ‘cause I just started saving... she buys the baby stuff too.”

In conclusion, fathers experienced vulnerability through economic struggles, which were compounded by the stress of their transition to adolescent fatherhood. They adapted to fatherhood through shifting their goals towards increasing their income. This adaptation co-occurred in their relationship with their child’s mother, at times cycling back to stress via conflict. However, even in the presence of negative adaptation, extended family was a critical addition to the model by offering support and helping to improve stability.

Discussion

The VSA model posits diverse pathways that explain links between enduring contextual vulnerability (i.e., low SES), acute stressors (i.e., fatherhood), and adaptation to adjust to these stressors (i.e., employment) in family life (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In this study, Latino fathers adapted to becoming new parents in three distinct ways in the context of economic vulnerability due to low SES: shifting educational and professional goals, co-parental relationships, and family-of-origin support (*familismo*). Findings highlight the importance of recognizing multiple adaptive mechanisms (e.g.,

couple, family-of-origin) in the transitioning to adolescent fatherhood.

The enduring vulnerability of low SES limits opportunities for adolescent Latino fathers. These fathers described how they adapted financially by searching for sources of income and delaying future goals. Young fathers often wish to financially support their new families in an attempt to adapt to parenthood, but frequently struggle to do so (Paschal et al., 2011). This might be especially true among Latino fathers who might feel the need to be an instrumental provider (Concha et al., 2016; Doherty et al., 1998).

Despite fathers' descriptions of their experiences of adaptation through trying to find jobs, it is important to note that adaptations do not take place solely within the father. According to the VSA model, interactions between members of the relationship, namely with the child's mother, are critical to adaptation (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Research on adolescent fathers has highlighted the importance of their child's mother in the transition to parenthood (Krishnakumar & Black, 2003; Paschal et al., 2011; Varga et al., 2017), a finding that is supported here. There were cases where interactions with their partners regarding employment aided in positive adaptation; however, others described that struggles in communication with their (former) partner made this task more challenging, cycling back to stress.

The fathers reported their child's mother wanted them to have a job, which might be partially explained by *familismo*, as fathers' financial family provision is a major tenet of this value. Specifically, economic provision was how the fathers adapted to the stress of parenthood; yet, struggles to do so sometimes brought about relationship conflict. Additionally, culture might play a part in adaptation as *familismo* is associated with a greater participation in co-parenting duties among adult Latinos (Sotomayor-Peterson et al., 2012), which might hold true for Latino adolescent parents. Therefore, co-parenting relationships should be considered when understanding adolescent fathers' experiences, as they can influence the adaptation process.

Familismo might also foster couples' ability to communicate, even disagree, without heightened conflict (Williams & Rueda, 2016). This might have been reflected in the fathers who adapted through facilitating a healthy relationship with the child's mother through positive communication. Yet, as given the secondary nature of the data, it was beyond the scope of the study to explicitly ask about cultural values. Future research

should embrace cultural strengths to better foster Latino fathers' adaptation in transitioning to parenthood.

Familismo also related to extended family support. Although its importance is certainly not limited to Latino adolescent fathers (Assini-Meytin et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2018), the dynamics the participants described were aligned with many of the central tenets of *familismo* (Calzada et al., 2012). One important aspect of *familismo* in this study was the fathers' inclusion of extended family in their adaptive processes (Calzada et al., 2012). For example, even fathers who described negative co-parenting communication discussed at least one family member, such as a parent or aunt, who contributed to the maintenance of familial reciprocity. Extant research supports the importance of family support for adolescent parents (Fagan et al., 2007; Saleh & Hilton, 2011), but extended family support is not often acknowledged as part of the VSA model. Similarly, although not studied here, mothers' family-of-origin might also aid in positive adaptation in a similar way (Krishnakumar & Black, 2003). Our findings support the need to include non-parental family members when using the VSA model with adolescent parents.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it involved secondary data analysis of interviews focused on dating violence. As such, the interview discussions skewed towards instances of conflict and conflict escalation. Further, not all fathers had been in violent relationships as participants were asked about both experiences with *and* perceptions of dating violence (Bermea & Toews, 2018). Therefore, findings might have reflected more negative co-parenting interactions rather than positive ones. Additionally, the original interview protocol did not directly inquire about finances, nor account for each participant's fathering roles, such as distinguishing between custody arrangements, specific duties, or child support obligations. Rather, utilizing the VSA model, we contextualized financial strain as an enduring vulnerability that was impacting parenting stress and adaptation. Another limitation is that participants were recruited from a relationship education program for adolescent parents and might have had different experiences than adolescents who have not participated in such a program. Similarly,

given that some fathers were not able to participate, findings might have differed based on their experiences. Further, all of the fathers were still enrolled in school, meaning their goals might differ from those who were no longer in school. Those who work with adolescent fathers should consider conducting a similar study among other groups, including fathers who have not participated in a relationship education program or those who have left school (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Despite the small sample, the size is similar to other qualitative studies of adolescent fathers (Wilkes et al., 2012).

Although there are limitations to the present study, it provides important strength-based implications to practice and policy for working with Latino adolescent fathers. As the purpose of the study was to better understand adaptation experiences, we offer practice recommendations in light of the experiences of the fathers that participated in this study. These suggestions foster a strength-based approach to working with this population, which can help to avoid perpetuating the stigma adolescent fathers often face (Conn et al., 2018).

Implications

Practitioner Oriented

Findings suggest multiple locations (i.e., goals, co-parenting, family-of-origin) to facilitate interventions that promote adaptation for low-income Latino adolescent fathers. Social workers can create meaningful connections for adolescent fathers regarding vocational development, which has been correlated with positive work experiences and educational attainment (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014). Although Latino adolescents might be less likely to have access to the resources needed to be successful in achieving these goals (Schneider et al., 2006), those who do are more likely to successfully complete their education (Futris et al., 2012).

It is also important to consider co-parents' relationships and provide relationship education to foster stability (Neal, 2016). The fathers in this study reported positive and negative interactions that both facilitated and hindered their adaptation, respectively. Although conflict in Latino adolescent fathers' co-parenting relationships might not be uncommon, many do demonstrate successful and productive communication (Williams & Rueda, 2016). Relationship education can be an especially impactful tool to help

pregnant and parenting adolescents learn better communication skills in co-parenting and extended family relationships (Toews & Yazedjian, 2010), all of which are important to the fathers' adaptation.

Research Oriented

Given the positive influence of extended family and the importance of family support for adolescent parents to mitigate stress (Fagan et al., 2007), it is important to consider those who are outside the co-parenting dyad. Latino identity and *familismo* might influence the importance of extended family, manifested here as emotional and parenting support (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2016; Updegraff et al., 2012). Although often regarded as a Latino value, *familismo* might also be applicable to other groups, such as Black adolescent fathers (Paschal et al., 2011; Wilkes et al., 2012). Working with the family-of-origin in a way that recognizes the support they can offer is a helpful practice (Benson, 2004), as these relationships can facilitate family stability and adaptation when experiencing stress (Fagan et al., 2007). The findings and implications of this study provide important contributions on the ways in which practitioners can work with low-income Latino fathers and help them to adapt to the stressful transition to parenthood.

Conclusion

This study makes important contributions to our understanding of Latino adolescent fathers' adaptation processes. Despite enduring economic vulnerability, including low income and limited resources, fathers' educational and professional goals as well as, in some cases, positive co-parenting relationships, served as adaptive mechanisms. Findings also emphasize the importance of a positive, holistic family experience that includes cultural notions of familismo. By identifying the processes by which adolescent fathers experience vulnerabilities, stress, and adaptation to stressors, it is possible to develop and implement culturally responsive and strengths-based services and policies to better support the transition to parenthood for Latino adolescent fathers.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest Authors reported no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee from Texas State University Institutional Review Board (2014T2817) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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