Introduction

Adolescent Latinos are at greater risk for psychological distress due to higher rates of poverty, acculturative stressors, and low educational attainment. The combination of these factors increases risk for adolescent pregnancy. Psychological distress in adolescent Latina mothers can lead to poor parenting practices, financial and parenting stress, and poor developmental outcomes in their children. Social support can serve as a protective factor against economic difficulties and has been shown to improve mental health in adolescent mothers. Familism is often defined as a strong connection to one’s family and has been shown to moderate the relation between social support and psychological adjustment. First, we hypothesized that father support would reduce psychological distress. We also hypothesized that adolescent mothers who endorsed more familistic values are able to take advantage of social support provided by their fathers, and thus, have better psychological health than adolescent mothers who endorse fewer familistic values.

Methods

Participants: Adolescents of primarily Puerto Rican origin (83%) who reported contact with their fathers (N = 135) in a large, Midwestern city. Mean age was 19.45 (SD = 1.39), 21% had earned a high school diploma, 40% were employed, and 88% received welfare benefits.

Measures:
- **Economic Strain**: 7 items rated using a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always) (Pearlin, et al., 1981).
- **Negative Life Events**: rated stressful events using Likert scale from 0 (extremely negative) to 5 (extremely positive); negative events were weighted more than positive events (Life Events Survey; Sarason, et al., 1978).
- **Social Support Network Questionnaire**: composite of social support created by totaling each type of support an individual was nominated for; scores ranged from 0 (no types) to 6 (all types) (Rhodes, et al., 1999).
- **Attitudinal Familism**: 20 items rated using a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003).
- **Symptom Checklist-90-R**: 42 symptoms rated using a Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (a huge amount); four subscales averaged together to form a composite score (Derogatis, 1994).

Procedure: Adolescents were recruited primarily through pediatric clinics in low-income Latino neighborhoods. Participants completed measures on a computer during a 3-hour home visit by two female researchers. The home visit was conducted in the language of the adolescent’s choice – English (75%) or Spanish.

Results

Adolescent age, negative life events, and father support were significantly related to psychological distress. Control variables were selected based on prior literature and relation to psychological distress composite in Table 1.

Adolescent age in Step 1 of the hierarchical regression accounted for 4% of the variance in distress. Negative life events were significantly associated with distress and economic strain was not; these variables accounted for an additional 20% of the variance in distress. In Step 3, father support was significantly associated with distress, but familism was not. These variables accounted for an additional 4% of the variance in distress. The interaction between term (familism X support) was not significant and excluded from the Table 2.

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Discussion

The present study examined the relation between father support on psychological distress symptoms of adolescent Latina mothers. Very little research has been devoted to the effects of father support, particularly in minority adolescent samples. The hypothesis that support reduces psychological distress was confirmed, however the secondary hypothesis that familism played a moderating role in the relation between support and distress was not confirmed by our analyses.

Further examination of the impact of father support on psychological distress is needed as the present study did not account for quality of adolescent-father relationships and whether or not living with the father plays a role (adolescents merely reported “contact”). Finally, future research should examine the effects of individual types of support, rather than a composite score to determine which types of support are most beneficial. Limitations include using self-report measures and interventions should focus on educating parents of adolescent mothers about the importance of their support.

References


