

Ethnic Variations in the Structural Family Relations of Substance-Using Adolescents

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Background

Cultural differences in normative family functioning have long interested family theorists and therapists (Falco, 1998; McGoldrick et al., 2005). Of particular interest is the possibility that the adaptive significance of structural family systems patterns such as enmeshment, parent-child role reversal, and cross-generation coalitions varies by culture (Hoffman, 1981). For example, parent-child coalitions may be less associated with child problems in Hispanic cultural groups that place more emphasis on extended kinship ties than does the dominant nuclear-family culture, or role reversal may be more problematic in cultures that emphasize respect for authority and tradition along with intergenerational bonds (Falco, 1998). In the present study we first examined ethnic differences in structural family systems patterns during a family interaction task across samples of Hispanic, African American, and White families with a substance-using adolescent. Then, to test the cultural-variant hypothesis, we examined ethnicity as a possible moderator of associations between observed structural family systems dynamics and adolescent substance use severity.

Method

Participants were 457 families with a 12-17 year-old adolescent referred for substance-abuse treatment in NIDA CTN protocol 014. Before treatment began, families participated in videotaped family interaction assessment tasks, during which they planned a menu, described what pleased and displeased them about each other, and discussed a recent family argument. Later, a team of trained observers reliably coded specific structural patterns, including enmeshment, disengagement, role-reversal, conflict avoidance, identified patient-hood, and (if two parent figures were present) cross-generation coalitions (Rohrbaugh, 2007; Szapocznik et al., 1991). A composite measure of substance-use severity at baseline combined Timeline Follow-back self-reports and urine drug screens. The index adolescents were 79% male, 23% African-American, and 44% Hispanic, with Mexican American, Cuban American, and Puerto Rican subgroups. Overall, Hispanic families had more participants in the interaction tasks ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.76$) than White families ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.30$) and African American families ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.21$).

Summary

Ethnic variations in enmeshment, role reversal, conflict avoidance, identified patient-hood, and cross-generation coalitions appeared during family assessment interaction tasks involving Hispanic, African American, and White substance-using adolescents. Associations between some of these structural family systems patterns and adolescent substance use severity also varied with ethnicity.

Results

Analyses of covariance (controlling number of family participants) revealed significant ethnicity main effects for enmeshment, role reversal, conflict avoidance, identified patient-hood, and cross-generation coalitions. In post hoc comparisons, Hispanic families showed more enmeshment, more parent-child role reversal, and fewer cross-generation coalitions than other groups. African Americans showed more conflict avoidance, less control role reversal, less enmeshment, and less identified patient-hood, and compared to minorities, White families were low on conflict avoidance and high on cross-generation triangles. The only notable ethnicity x adolescent-sex interaction involved role reversal, which was more evident with Hispanic boys than girls. In tests of the cultural variant hypothesis, ethnicity did serve to moderate associations between several structural-systems patterns and the severity or extent of adolescent substance use. In Hispanic families, for example, enmeshment appeared less problematic compared to other sub-groups, while conflict avoidance was more associated with adolescent problem severity (Table 1).

Ethnic Differences in Structural Family Relations
(*H*=Hispanic, *A*=African American, *W*=White)

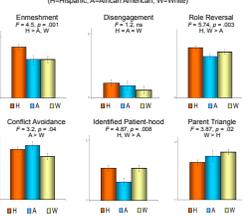


Table 1. Within-group partial correlations between structural-systems patterns and adolescent substance use severity (with family size and adolescent gender controlled).

Structural Pattern	Race/Ethnicity			Pattern x Ethnicity F-value
	Hispanics (n=197)	African Americans (n=104)	Whites (n=138)	
Enmeshment	.22*	.12	.07	4.82**
Disengagement	.02	.04	-.12	.90
Role Reversal	-.08	.13	.10	1.80
Conflict Avoidance	.18**	-.15	.07	3.53**
Identified Patient-hood	.14†	.07	.10	.13
Parent Triangle	-.10	-.18	-.15	.23

*p < .01, **p < .05, †p < .10

Conclusions-Significance

The results provide tentative support for a cultural variant perspective on structural family relations, at least regarding substance-using Hispanic adolescents. Such a perspective may provide meaningful implications for therapy with families from different cultural backgrounds. Future research in this area should distinguish mean-level (main effect) differences in family functioning from the possible moderating role of ethnicity in associations between family processes and child outcomes. As evidence accumulates that specific structural patterns like enmeshment or role reversal have different adaptive implications in different cultural contexts, clinicians can be more confident in adjusting their interventions accordingly.

References

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