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## Psychological Adjustment among Young Puerto Rican Mothers: Perceived Partner Support and the Moderating Role of Latino Cultural Orientation

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### Abstract

Adolescent mothers face multiple stressors and are at risk for experiencing high levels of depressive symptoms and parenting stress. This study examined the interplay of Latino cultural orientation and perceived support from romantic partners in protecting the adjustment of young, low-income, Puerto Rican mothers ( $N = 103$ ;  $M$  age = 18.0 yrs;  $SD = 1.2$ ) during the second year postpartum. In multivariate analyses, perceived partner support was uniquely and negatively associated with both maternal depressive symptoms and parenting stress. However, in the case of parenting stress, this association was moderated by mothers' Latino cultural orientation. Perceived partner support was related to less parenting stress when mothers endorsed a relatively strong Latino cultural orientation; perceived partner support was no longer protective at low levels of Latino orientation. The implications for intervention and for the understanding of the role of culture in social support processes within close relationships are discussed.

### Keywords

Adolescent Mothers; Latina Mothers; Psychological Adjustment; Cultural Orientation; Partner Social Support; Romantic Relationships

The transition to parenting is a challenging milestone, especially for those who undergo this experience at an early age (Wakschlag & Hans, 2000). Compared to non-parenting adolescents, adolescent mothers are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and have poorer academic performance (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). They are also more likely than adult mothers to live in poverty and experience numerous stressful life events (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). These psychosocial risks contribute to adjustment difficulties in young mothers (Mollborn & Morningstar, 2009). In particular, they experience high levels of depressive symptoms and parenting stress (i.e., stress that results from the demands of being a parent; Abidin, 1992) during the postpartum years (Zeiders, Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2015; Whitman, Borkowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001; Reid & Meadows-Oliver, 2007). Notably, Latina adolescents have a substantially higher birthrate than that of any other group in the United States (U.S.; Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2013), making it especially important to uncover factors that may facilitate their adjustment despite their disadvantaged conditions.

The general goal of the current study was to investigate developmentally- and culturally-salient factors that can promote the psychological and parenting adjustment of young Latina mothers. Specifically, using a risk and resilience framework (Rutter, 1987), which highlights the importance of the interplay between specific risks and resources that can protect an individual's adjustment, we examined perceived social support (i.e., social resources that persons perceive to be available to them; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990) as a protective factor for the young mothers' adjustment. The perception of availability of support during stressful situations is thought to reduce stress, enhance psychological well-being, and facilitate adjustment, especially among those parenting under disadvantaged conditions (Thompson, Flood, & Goodwin, 2006; Sarason et al., 1990). We focused on perceived support from romantic partners, a developmentally salient source of support for young mothers. Starting in adolescence, individuals place increasing importance on romantic relationships, and these relationships have strong implications for psychological well-being (Cauce, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1996; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Moreover, research with adult mothers indicates that partner support is especially protective for adjustment during the postnatal period (Tanner Stapleton et al., 2012).

Partners are also a culturally-salient source of support for young Latina mothers. A relatively large percentage of Latina mothers, and immigrant/Spanish-speaking mothers in particular, are involved in long-term partner relationships during the postpartum years (Contreras, López, Rivera-Mosquera, Raymond-Smith, & Rothstein, 1999; Moore, Florsheim, & Butner, 2007; Reynoso, Felice, & Shragg, 1993; Wasserman, Brunelli, Rauh, & Alvarado, 1994). For example, among mothers participating in the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project when their children were 14 months old, 32% of Latina mothers, 41% of the European American (EA) mothers, and 7% of the African American (AA) mothers were cohabiting with their partners (Eshbaugh, 2006). In a sample of young mothers of predominantly Puerto Rican origin, 52% of the mothers cohabited with a partner (Contreras, 2004).

These relatively high rates for Latina mothers are consistent with familism, a belief system that defines the family as the preeminent socialization agent and emphasizes the importance

of solidarity, interdependence, and readily available support within the family group (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002). Early marriages have been historically common in Latin American countries, and in the case of early or unplanned pregnancies, cultural traditions encourage fathers to assume their parental and family responsibilities (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002; García-Coll & Vazquez-Garcia, 1996). Research with adult Latino fathers indicates that fathers who endorse more traditional Latino values demonstrate higher levels of involvement and commitment to their families (Cruz et al., 2011; Glass & Owen, 2010). Latino traditions also place high value on childbearing and the formation of a new family unit, and traditional gender roles emphasize the woman's role as mother and wife (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002). Consistently, Latina adolescents report more positive attitudes and intentions regarding pregnancy than their non-Latina peers (Abma, Martinez, & Dawson, 2004). There is also some indication that these values influence Latino adolescents' romantic relationship preferences and choices (Flores, Eyre, & Millstein, 1998; Halgunseth, 2004). Thus, partners represent a developmentally- and culturally-salient source of support for young Latina mothers.

Given that young mothers are less cognitively and emotionally prepared to parent (Contreras, Narang, Ikhlas, & Teichman, 2002; Whitman et al., 2001) and must do so in a disadvantaged context (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008), support from partners may be especially effective in facilitating the young mothers' adjustment. Gaining a better understanding of the role of these relationships has clear implications for tailoring prevention efforts that can meet the needs and characteristics of these young mothers. However, little research provides insight into these relationships or whether mothers benefit from the support they may perceive from their partners. Thus, we examined whether perceived partner support played a unique role in facilitating the mothers' adjustment. In addition, given that cultural values influence expectations regarding family and romantic relationships, and the support that is exchanged within these relationships (Campos, Rojas Perez, & Guardino, 2014; Flores, et al., 1998; Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008), we tested whether the associations between perceived partner support and adjustment varied as a function of the strength of the mothers' Latino cultural orientation (i.e., degree to which they endorse values and behaviors of the Latino culture; Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995).

## **Social Support and Maternal Psychological Adjustment**

Consistent with theories of social support (Sarason et al., 1990), research on overall perceived support has generally documented positive relations with the adjustment of young mothers (Grau, Wilson, Weller, Castellanos, & Duran, 2012). For example, larger supportive social networks are related to less depressive symptomatology, greater life satisfaction, and affectively positive and sensitive parenting across ethnic groups (Brown, Harris, Woods, Buman, & Cox, 2012, Contreras, Mangelsdorf, Rhodes, Diener, & Brunson, 1999; Cox et al., 2008).

## Romantic relationships, partner support, and adjustment

The role of support from partners is less clear than the one for overall support. Prior studies focused primarily on EA and AA adolescent mothers and yielded mixed results. Several found partner support was related to better psychological functioning (Edwards, Isarowong, Shiu, Hensin, & Hans, 2012; Gee & Rhodes, 1999; Laghi, Baumgartner, Riccio, Bohr, & Dhayanandhan, 2013). For instance, in samples of AA mothers, perceived partner support was related to lower depressive symptoms (Edwards et al., 2012) and psychological distress, and higher self-esteem (Thompson & Pebbles-Wilkins, 1992). Other studies reported negative or no relations to adjustment (Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Shapiro & Mangelsdorf, 1994; Voight, Hans, & Bernstein, 1996). For example among EA mothers partner support was related to lower parenting skills (Shapiro & Mangersdorf, 1994). Finally, studies have also shown that partners are often a source of conflict and disappointment, which is associated with adjustment difficulties (Gee & Rhodes, 1999).

A few studies examined this relation in samples with representation of Latina mothers. In samples of AA and Caribbean-origin adolescents, maternal report of partner financial support was related to fewer depressive symptoms (Leadbeater & Linares, 1992), and father social support was related to lower levels of power–assertive childrearing attitudes (Brunelli et al., 1995). In a sample of AA and Latina adolescents, maternal report of the quality of their romantic relationship with the child’ father during pregnancy did not predict parenting adjustment (i.e., abuse potential, parenting behaviors), however, decreases in perceived quality across the transition to parenting were associated with higher levels of parenting stress (Florsheim & Smith, 2005; Florsheim, et al., 2003). Satisfaction with father involvement was related to fewer depressive symptoms, but was un-related to parenting stress in another sample of AA and Latina mothers (Fagan & Lee, 2010).

Findings from purely Latino samples have also been mixed. Among Latina adolescent mothers of primarily Puerto Rican origin, greater perceived partner support related to fewer psychological symptoms but not to parenting stress (Contreras, Lopez et al., 1999). In another study based on this same sample, great partner social support was related to the display of less negative affect during mother-child interactions (Contreras, 2004). In a sample of Latina adolescents from different countries of origin, mothers who reported higher levels of partner support displayed less maternal sensitivity; partner support was not related to maternal expressivity (Contreras, Mangelsdorf, et al., 1999). Finally, among Mexican-origin adolescent mothers, perceived support from a significant other was related to higher parenting self-efficacy (Umaña-Taylor, Guimond, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2013). In sum, the sparse literature provides some indication that partner support may be protective for young Latina mothers’ psychological adjustment; how it relates to their parenting adjustment is less clear.

## The Role of Latino Cultural Orientation

Cultural orientation influences expectations regarding family and romantic relationships and the support that is exchanged within these relationships (Campos et al., 2014; Flores, et al., 1998; Uchida et al., 2008). In the case of the Latino culture, where support from a partner is culturally sanctioned, expected, and valued by mothers (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez,

2002), young mothers may be better able to benefit from perceived partner support. Thus, in addition to testing whether perceived partner support was directly associated with adjustment, we examined whether variations in the mothers' endorsement of a Latino cultural orientation influenced how support related to adjustment.

Although the literature on adolescent mothers has not examined this effect, the adult literature offers some support for this prediction. Among adult Latina mothers, perceived social support during pregnancy related to more favorable birth outcomes among foreign-born mothers (proxy for a stronger Latino cultural orientation), but it was not related among U.S.-born mothers. These results suggest that foreign-born mothers were better able to benefit from the support they perceived from their close relationships than U.S.-born mothers (Campos et al., 2008). More generally, a growing literature provides support for the role of culture as moderator of links between various support processes (e.g., provision, perceived support) and adjustment (Barnett, Mortensen, Tilley, & Gonzalez, 2013; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007; Uchida et al., 2008). Drawing from an independence-interdependence theory of cultural self, Kitayama and colleagues (2007) showed cultural differences in the extent to which individuals benefit from perceived support. For instance, Uchida and collaborators (2008) demonstrated a stronger and direct link between perceived support and well-being among Asian (interdependent culture) than among EA (independent culture) adolescents and adults.

## Overview of the Study

In sum, the goals of this study were twofold. First, given that little is known about the partner relationships of young Latina mothers, we provide descriptive information on these relationships and contextualize this information by examining how the strength of the mothers' orientation toward the Latino culture related to these characteristics. Given previous findings, we expected that mothers with a stronger Latino cultural orientation would be more likely to be in longer-term and more established relationships (e.g., married, co-residing with partner) than those who reported less engagement with Latino culture.

Second, the more central goal was to test whether perceived partner support was positively associated with the young mother's adjustment. We focused on perceived rather than actual social support, as it is a stronger predictor of well-being (Thompson et al., 2006), and assessed adjustment through mothers' reports of depressive symptoms and parenting stress. These two domains of adjustment are central for mothers' and children's adaptation during the first years postpartum (Crnic, & Low, 2002; Goodman et al., 2010), and adolescent mothers are at heightened risk for experiencing these difficulties (Mollborn & Morningstar, 2009). Given that children of adolescent mothers begin to show deficits during the second year of life, and these deficits are related to changes in maternal behavior (Whitman et al., 2001), we studied mothers' adjustment during the second year postpartum. Examining families beyond the transition to parenting also allowed us to capture relatively established patterns of partner relationships and support provision. Given the wide range of needs and stressors young, low-income mothers face, we examined availability of support across several basic support types that have been commonly studied in the literature (e.g., emotional, tangible; Gee & Rhodes, 2007).

We hypothesized that higher perceived partner support would relate to fewer depressive symptoms and lower parenting stress, and expected that this effect would be present above and beyond the effect of overall perceived support. Importantly, we expected that this association would be stronger when mothers endorsed a stronger Latino cultural orientation. To more rigorously assess these associations, we considered a number of control variables. First, to assess the unique effect of Latino cultural orientation, above and beyond the effect of American cultural orientation (i.e., orientation toward mainstream American values, behaviors, and traditions; Cuellar et al., 1995) we controlled for the mothers' engagement in the American culture. Second, because more traditional Latina adolescents are involved in more established partner relationships (e.g., married, cohabitating) than their less traditional peers, we also controlled for relationship characteristics in all analyses.

Finally, given demonstrated links of demographic and contextual characteristics to the psychological and parenting adjustment of adolescent mothers (Mollborn & Dennis, 2012), we controlled for these variables when they showed relations with our adjustment variables. Specifically, we considered maternal age and level of education as proxies for readiness to parent, because readiness is linked to adjustment in adolescent mothers (Whitman et al., 2001), and life stress, because of its known effect on psychological adjustment (Wakschlag & Hans 2000). We also considered maternal work and government assistance status to index mothers' socio-economic resources given their link to parenting in minority families (García-Coll et al., 1996). However, our sample was relatively homogeneous in regard to socio-economic status, so we did not expect significant associations for economic variables.

## Method

### Participants

Participants ( $N = 103$ ) were drawn from a larger ( $N = 170$ ) study of young Latina mothers of various countries of origin. Mothers participated with their children when the children were 18 months old. For the current study, only mothers who self-identified as being of Puerto Rican origin (140 of the 170, 82.4%; others were of Mexican [7.1%] and Central and South American [10.5%] origin) and as being in a romantic relationship at the time of participation (73.4% of Puerto Rican origin mothers) were selected. Chi-square and t-test analyses indicated that mothers with partners did not vary significantly from those without a partner on key demographic variables or depressive symptoms and parenting stress.

The mean age at birth of the 103 mothers in the current study was 18.0 years ( $SD = 1.2$ ; range: 14.5 – 19.9). Children's mean age was 18.3 months ( $SD = .94$ ; 43.7% female; 83.5% only or first child). Mothers resided in low-income neighborhoods of a Midwestern city, and 87.4% received government assistance. In regard to nativity, 44% were born outside of the mainland U.S. The majority reported living with their partner (67%). Regarding educational attainment, 32.1% had earned at least a high school degree, 27.1% had completed 11<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 31% had completed 9<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and 9.7% had completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade or lower. At time of interview, 28.2% of the mothers were attending school and 42.7% were employed.

Partners' mean age was 22.2 years ( $SD= 3.66$ ; range 17–36). Most (66%) were of Latino origin (7.8% EA; 20.4% AA; 5.8% other) and 39% were born outside the mainland U.S. In regard to the partners' education, 40.2% had earned at least a high school degree, 24.5% had completed 11<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade and 35.4% had completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade or lower. Most (67%) had full or part-time employment. Most partners (76%) were the child's biological father, 19.2% of them were married to the participants, and 67% resided with her. The majority of relationships were long-term, with 72.8% lasting at least 2 years (range = 1 month or less to 5 or more years).

## Procedure

Institutional Review Board approval was received for the study. Most participants (78.2%) were recruited from public pediatric clinics serving low-income families; others were referred by friends/relatives, self or service providers. The participation rate was 70.5%. The data were collected during home visits (approximately 2 ½ hours), which were conducted by two female experimenters in the mother's preferred language (72% English, 28% Spanish). Participants' (and parent/guardian if a minor) informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Mothers were interviewed and video recorded interacting with their children. Interviews were conducted using a computer-assisted procedure in which questions were presented on the screen and read aloud by the researcher to control for reading level. As compensation, participants received \$70. Only questionnaire data were available for this study.

## Measures

Mean and standard deviations for the main study variables appears in Table 1. Cronbach's alphas are provided below, separately for English and Spanish responders. None of the main study variables had missing data.

**Perceived social support**—Perceived partner and overall network social support were measured using the Social Support Network Questionnaire (SSNQ; Gee & Rhodes, 2007). Participants were asked to nominate all persons they perceived as available to provide each of six types of support: Emotional (talk about something personal), Cognitive Guidance (advice or information), Positive Feedback (tell you they like your ideas), Social Participation (get together to have fun and relax), Instrumental Assistance (pitch in, lend or give you something you need), and Child Care support (help with care of the child). To generate a composite reflecting extent of perceived support from partners, we summed the number of support types for which partners were perceived to be available. This variable, perceived partner support, ranged from 0 (the partner was not perceived as available to provide any of the support types) to 6 (the partner was perceived as available to provide all types). To index perceived overall network support, the number of network members (excluding partners) perceived as available to provide at least one of the 6 types of support assessed were totaled. This variable reflects the size of the mothers' supportive social network, and ranged from 1 to 10 members. The SSNQ was validated in a sample of pregnant and parenting AA and Latina adolescents (Gee & Rhodes, 2007) and has been frequently used to assess network and individual support in samples of AA and Spanish- and English-speaking Latina adolescent mothers (Contreras, 2004; Gee & Rhodes, 2003).

**Depressive symptoms**—The 13-item, depression scale of the Symptom Checklist-90-R, a widely used self-report measure of psychological distress in ethnic minority community samples of mothers (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1994; Chapman, Petrie & Vines, 2012), was used to assess mothers' depressive symptoms in the last two weeks. Responses ranged from 0 – 'not at all' to 4 – 'extremely.' Adequate reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ) for this scale was found in the normative sample (Derogatis, 1994) and in studies with young Latina mothers (López & Contreras, 2005). In our sample, the internal consistency was .87, for the whole sample, and .85 and .91 for English and Spanish respondents, respectively. Depression scores were positively skewed; a square-root transformation was applied which improved normality (skewness = .29, kurtosis = .34).

**Parenting stress**—Four scales of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1992) were used to assess two aspects of parenting stress. Child domain stress, reflecting child characteristics that lead to stress, was computed using the items of the Reinforces Parent and Acceptability scales (e.g., my child rarely does things for me that make me feel good, my child does a few things which bother me a great deal). Parenting role stress, reflecting perceptions of greater restriction and isolation due to the parenting role, was computed using the items of the Restriction of Role and Social Isolation scales (e.g., I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent, I often have the feeling that other people my own age don't particularly like my company). The internal consistency of these two variables was adequate (child domain stress  $\alpha$ 's = .82. for entire sample, .84 for English, and .79 for Spanish respondents; parenting role stress  $\alpha$ 's = .83 for entire sample, .84 for English, and .77 for Spanish respondents). These two parenting stress variables were significantly inter-correlated ( $r = .54, p < .001$ ) and were combined to create an overall parenting stress variable.

**Latino and American cultural orientation**—The Latino (LOS; 17 items) and Anglo (AOS; 13 items) Orientation subscales of the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-II (ARSMA-II; Cuéllar et al., 1995) were used to assess mothers' orientation to Latino and American culture, respectively. Although this measure does not explicitly assess specific Latino or American values, it assesses language use and preference, involvement in cultural activities, ethnic identification of self and family, and ethnic interactions to reflect the respondents' general orientation toward the Latino and American culture. Responses ranged from 1 – 'Not at all' to 5 – 'Extremely Often or Almost Always,' with a midpoint of 3 – 'Moderately.' Cuéllar et al. (1995) found adequate internal reliabilities for both subscales. The ARSMA-II has been used extensively with Latinos of different countries of origin (Garcia, Hurwitz, & Kraus, 2005). Adequate reliability was found in the current sample for both scales (LOS:  $\alpha = .84$  whole sample;  $\alpha = .82$  English;  $\alpha = .76$  Spanish; AOS:  $\alpha = .92$  whole sample;  $\alpha = .78$  English;  $\alpha = .89$  Spanish).

**Negative life events**—Life stress was measured using a modified version of the Life Events Survey (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978), a 34-item questionnaire adapted for young minority mothers (Rhodes, Ebert, & Fisher, 1992). It assesses the occurrence and valence of major life stressors occurring in the past year (e.g., experienced a serious illness/injury; death of a close relative/friend). Mothers rated the events on a 5-point scale ranging



from extremely negative to extremely positive. The life stress score was computed by totaling the weighted scores (1 = somewhat negative; 2 = extremely negative) for the events experienced as negative with higher scores reflecting greater stress. This measure has demonstrated validity in samples of AA and Latina adolescent mothers (Contreras, Mangelsdorf et al., 1999; Rhodes et al., 1992).

## Results

### Overview of Analyses

We first provide descriptive information on partner support and relationship characteristics, followed by associations among these variables and maternal cultural orientation. We then present preliminary analyses used to inform the selection of control variables for the main analyses. Finally, we tested our hypotheses using two hierarchical linear regressions which examined 1) if perceived partner support had a unique effect on maternal depressive symptoms and parenting stress, and 2) whether the associations between perceived partner support and each of the maternal adjustment variables were moderated by maternal Latino cultural orientation.

### Mothers' Cultural Orientation, Relationship characteristics, and Partner Support

Partners were perceived as being quite supportive. Most mothers (71%) perceived them as available for at least four of the six types of support assessed; 13.6% were available for one to three types, and 15.5% were not perceived as available to provide any of the types of support. Partner ethnicity and country of origin were significantly associated with mothers' Latino cultural orientation. Mothers with Latino partners ( $t(101) = -5.38, p < .001; d = 1.11$ ) and those with immigrant partners ( $t(100) = -2.92, p = .004; d = .61$ ) reported significantly higher Latino cultural orientation. Relationship characteristics were also associated with mothers' Latino cultural orientation. Married mothers ( $t(101) = -3.06, p = .003; d = .84$ ), those residing with their partners ( $t(101) = -3.63, p < .001; d = .72$ ), and those in a relationship with the child's father ( $t(101) = -3.02, p = .003; d = .71$ ) endorsed a stronger Latino orientation; the relationships of mothers with a stronger Latino orientation also tended to be longer than those of mothers with lower levels of Latino orientation ( $r = .19, p = .057$ ). The relationship characteristics were highly intercorrelated ( $r$  range = .20 to .81) and were combined to derive a *relationship indicator* variable, which is an index of the level of commitment of the relationships. Length of relationship was dichotomized at the median (0 =  $\leq 2$  years; 1 =  $> 2$  years) and summed with: marital status (0 = not married; 1 = married), residence (0 = not with partner; 1 = with partner), and paternity of child (0 = not father of child; 1 = child's father). The relationship indicator ranged from 0 to 4, with higher scores reflecting more fully committed relationships.

### Selection of Control Variables

First, to select demographic and contextual stress variables to include as controls, we used bivariate correlations and  $t$  tests to assess relations of depressive symptoms and parenting stress to the following variables: child age and gender; negative life events, and mother age, education, school, work, and receipt of public assistance status. Depressive symptoms were significantly correlated with greater negative life events ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ) and parenting

stress was related to lower maternal age ( $r = -.35, p < .001$ ). These two variables, together with the relationship indicator were used as controls in multivariate analyses.

### Univariate Associations among Main Study Variables

Correlations among main study variables appear in Table 1. Maternal depressive symptoms and parenting stress were significantly but moderately intercorrelated. Higher perceived partner support and overall perceived support were significantly correlated with less depressive symptoms. The relationship indicator and Latino and American cultural orientation were unrelated to the adjustment variables, but mothers in more committed relationships reported higher partner support, higher Latino orientation, and lower American orientation; they were also older and reported less life stress than mothers in less committed relationships.

### Multivariate Associations between Partner Support and Psychological Adjustment

To test direct and moderated associations between perceived partner support and the two adjustment variables, we computed two hierarchical linear regressions<sup>1</sup>. All predictors were centered prior to analyses, and centered variables were used to create the interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991). The following variables were included in step one of each regression: 1) demographic and stress variables related to the corresponding adjustment variables, 2) overall perceived support, 3) American and Latino cultural orientation, and 4) the relationship indicator. In the second step, partner support was entered. The interaction term, perceived partner support  $\times$  Latino cultural orientation, was entered at the last step of each regression.

Regression results for depressive symptoms appear in Table 2. The interaction term for partner support and Latino cultural orientation was not significant and was excluded from the analysis. Control variables accounted for 21% ( $p < .001$ ), of the variance in depressive scores, and life event stress and overall support were significantly associated with depressive symptoms. Mothers who perceived greater overall support reported less depressive symptoms; those with more life stress reported more symptoms. At step 2, higher partner support added a significant amount of variance to the prediction of depressive symptoms ( $R^2 = .04, p = .035$ ).

Results for parenting stress appear in Table 3. Control variables accounted for 16% of the variance in parenting stress ( $p = .004$ ), with higher maternal age and overall perceived support predicting lower parenting stress. At step two, partner support added a significant amount of variance on parenting stress ( $R^2 = .05, p = .021$ ). Results for step 3 indicated that Latino cultural orientation moderated the relations between partner support and lower parenting stress, accounting for an additional 6% ( $p = .009$ ) of the variance on parenting stress. To probe this significant interaction, we plotted the predicted values of parenting stress based on all variables in the regression, separately for low ( $-1$  standard deviation) and

<sup>1</sup>Results from parallel regression analyses including all mothers in the original sample who were in a romantic relationship at the time of the study ( $N=125$ ; 103 Puerto Rican; 8 Mexican American; 14 Central & South American) and controlling for country of origin (Puerto Rican vs. non Puerto Rican) yielded essentially the same results as those reported for the Puerto Rican subsample (details available from the authors).

high (+1 standard deviation) Latino cultural orientation (Figure 1). Tests of simple slopes indicated that partner support related to less parenting stress at high levels of Latino cultural orientation ( $t(99) = -3.26, p = .001$ ) but not at low levels ( $t(99) = .21, p = .83$ ).

## Discussion

The current study examined the interplay of Latino cultural orientation and perceived partner support in protecting the psychological and parenting adjustment of young, low-income, Puerto Rican mothers during the second year postpartum. We found that most mothers were involved in relatively long-term romantic relationships and perceived their partners as quite supportive. As predicted, perceptions of greater partner support were associated with fewer depressive symptoms and lower parenting stress. Importantly, in the case of parenting stress, maternal cultural orientation influenced how perceived partner support related to the mothers' adjustment. Specifically, partner support was associated with lower parenting stress only at relatively high levels of Latino cultural orientation. Findings contribute to the literature by identifying a protective factor for the adjustment of young Puerto Rican mothers, an at-risk population that has received little research attention. The study also expands on previous work by highlighting the critical role of culture in shaping social support processes within the partner relationships of these young mothers.

Regarding our goal of describing these relationships, we found that over 70% of the Puerto Rican mothers in the larger sample from which our participants were drawn had a partner, and most (67%) resided with them. This finding corroborated those of other studies showing a substantial proportion of young Latina mothers are engaged in fairly committed relationships during the postpartum years (Contreras, López et al., 1999; Moore et al., 2007). As expected, among mothers with a partner, those with a stronger Latino cultural orientation were more likely to be married, to reside with their partners, and to be in a relationship with her child's father. These results for Puerto Rican-origin mothers add to prior research showing similar demographic profiles based on acculturation level among primarily Mexican-origin mothers (Reynoso et al., 1993). Together, these findings highlight the role of cultural orientation in shaping the young mothers' relationship and childrearing context during the first postpartum years.

Given the importance of the early childrearing environment for children's long-term development, increasing our knowledge of the influence that partner relationships have on mothers' adjustment is critical to appropriately tailor interventions for these young families. In our study, perceived partner support emerged as a unique predictor of both fewer depressive symptoms and less parenting stress, after accounting for perceived support from all others in the mothers' social network. This finding adds to the scant literature pointing to partner support as a resource that can promote the psychological adjustment of young Puerto Rican mothers during the postpartum period (Contreras, Lopez et al., 1999; Leadbeater & Linares, 1992). The unique contribution of partner support is also in line with findings for adult parents, which suggest that during the postpartum years the support mothers perceive from partner support is especially protective for their psychological well-being (Tanner Stapleton et al., 2012).

Given the high value that Latino culture places on raising children within a romantic relationship and the emphasis on close and supportive family relationships (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002), we expected perceived partner support would have a stronger effect on adjustment when mothers endorsed a stronger Latino cultural orientation. In the case of maternal depressive symptoms, this was not the case. The protective effect of partner support was similar at all levels of maternal cultural orientation. In support to our predictions, cultural orientation did moderate the association between partner support and lower parenting stress. Specifically, perceived partner support was protective for mothers' parenting stress only when mothers endorsed a relatively strong Latino cultural orientation. For mothers who endorsed a low Latino orientation, their perceptions of partner support were unrelated to their parenting adjustment.

Although our data does not speak to the specific mechanisms accounting for the moderating effect of cultural orientation, it is important to note that level of Latino cultural orientation was not correlated with the amount of support they perceived from their partners. Therefore, the positive effect of partner support among the more Latino-oriented mothers was not due to these mothers merely perceiving higher levels of support than the less Latino-oriented mothers. Instead, these mothers appear to have experienced or interpreted similar levels of perceived partner support in ways that benefitted their parenting adjustment.

These results align with the interpretation that perceived partner support may be more influential when the partner relationship is embedded in a culture that considers the family as the preeminent socialization vehicle and emphasizes the importance of interdependence and warm, supportive relationships among family members (Campos et al., 2008; Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002). In this cultural context, the importance of raising children within a romantic relationship may make partner support more valuable or consequential to mothers, especially in regard to their role as mothers. Young mothers who perceive extensive support from their partners may feel validated in their parenting role and more able to cope with the demands of parenting (Malette, Futris, Brown, & Oshri, 2015). Moreover, both the provision and receipt of support is culturally sanctioned and expected in this cultural context, making it easier for individuals to accept and benefit from perceived support (Kaniasty & Norris, 2000; Uchida et al., 2008). This interpretation is consistent with an emerging literature suggesting that cultural norms regarding relationships influence individuals' behaviors, expectations, and appraisals of interpersonal experiences, and in turn, the effectiveness of perceived support (Campos et al., 2008; Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000; Kim et al., 2008; Uchida et al., 2008).

The reasons for the differential pattern of associations for depressive symptoms and parenting stress are not clear. However, this pattern may suggest that for the more Latino-oriented mothers, partner support may be more strongly related to the perceptions of themselves in their role as mothers than to their individual adjustment. The pattern of results is also in line with the prior literature which has shown more consistent links for Latina mothers' individual wellbeing (e.g., depressive symptoms) than for their adjustment to parenting (Contreras, Lopez, et al., 1999; Fagan & Lee, 2010). The inconsistent findings may be due in part to variability of mothers' cultural orientation across samples, and the fact that past research did not examine culture as a moderator of these associations.

Examination of the plotted interaction for parenting stress revealed a pattern in which the low Latino-oriented mothers reported lower parenting stress than the more Latino-oriented mothers when they perceived low partner support, and at high levels of support, their stress levels were more similar to those of the more Latino oriented mothers. Thus, relative to the more Latino-oriented mothers, the less Latino-oriented mothers do not appear to be at higher risk for parenting stress than their more Latino oriented peers. It may be that these mothers have internal assets or other sources of support that facilitate their parenting adjustment. It may also be that it is the more Latino-oriented mothers' parenting stress that is heightened by the perceptions of low support from partners. Perceiving low levels of support in a context where support is expected may have an especially detrimental effect for these more Latino-oriented young mothers (Contreras, Lopez, et al., 1999). Studies that examine the role of different assets and sources of support simultaneously are needed to uncover factors that affect the adjustment of young Latina mothers with different cultural orientations.

In regard to other contextual factors related to mothers' adjustment, we found that overall network support played a unique protective role. Mothers with greater overall perceived social support reported fewer depressive symptoms and lower parenting stress, above and beyond the effect of partner support and demographic and life stress variables. This finding adds to the small literature linking overall perceived social support to adjustment among Latino parents, which has focused primarily on adult mothers of Mexican origin (Barnett et al., 2013; Cardoso, Padilla, & Sampson, 2010). This result is also in line with prior findings demonstrating a protective effect of overall perceived support on the parenting behaviors of Latina adolescent mothers of primarily Puerto Rican origin (Contreras, Mangerlsdorf et al., 1999). Unfortunately, despite the protective effect of social support, the presence of negative life stress in the young mothers' life was related to their experience of more depressive symptoms. Thus, stressful life events, which are common among low-income adolescent mothers (Wakschlag & Hans 2000), appear to have strong implications for their adjustment. Uncovering factors that may protect young mothers from life stress is another important goal for future research.

### **Study Limitations and Implications**

We relied on a widely-used global measure of Latino cultural orientation that assesses different behavioral and affective components of cultural orientation. However, although this measure was linked to behavioral indicators that are consistent with the endorsement of values associated with familism, it does not measure those specific Latino values (e.g., family member interdependence and solidarity). An important next step for research is to uncover the specific factors that account for the observed moderating effect of Latino cultural orientation. Obtaining the partners' reports of their cultural orientation and endorsement of Latino values would also provide a more complete characterization of the cultural context in which the partner relationships are embedded. A more in-depth understanding of the values and processes that enable mothers to benefit from their partners' support would not only inform intervention efforts with this at-risk population, but also further our knowledge of how culture can influence close relationships and the nature and function of the social support processes operating within them. Finally, given that the mothers in our sample were of low-socio-economic-status and of Puerto Rican origin, future

studies should examine whether the protective factors we identified for this group of mothers is also relevant for young mothers of other economic or ethnic backgrounds.

Our findings have important implications for intervention. The differential effects of partner support on mothers' adjustment indicate that programs need to be tailored to the specific needs of Latina mothers with different cultural orientations. Providers also need to be aware that the perceived availability of partner support does not necessarily indicate mothers are directly benefiting from this support, especially for less Latino-oriented mothers. For more Latino-oriented mothers, work could focus on helping couples maintain positive relationships and cope together with the ongoing demands they encounter. More generally, our findings suggest that early screening should include an evaluation of the mothers' close relationships and social networks, as small or unsupportive networks may place them at risk for psychological and parenting adjustment difficulties. Finally, given that the association between life stress and depressive symptoms persisted even when the effects of social support were accounted for, interventions should also increase the adolescents' resources and skills to cope with life stress.

The current study identified perceived partner support as a protective factor for the adjustment of young Puerto Rican mothers; a highly understudied population despite their significant risk for difficult adjustment. The study is also the first empirical investigation to demonstrate that Latino cultural orientation moderates the relations between perceived partner support and the parenting adjustment of young Latina mothers. Findings add to the small, but growing literature demonstrating the need to account for the cultural context in which relationships are embedded in order to appropriately understand the nature and impact that perceived support has on an individual's adjustment.

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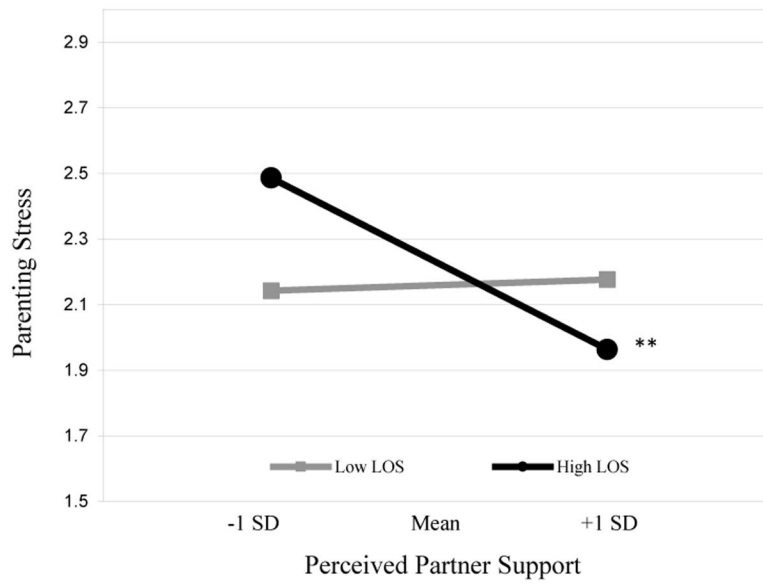
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**Figure 1.** Maternal Latino cultural orientation moderates the relation between perceived partner support and parenting stress. *Note.* LOS = Latino orientation scale. \*\*p = .001

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**Table 1**

Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Main Study Variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Depressive symptoms	-								
2. Parenting stress	<b>.44</b>	-							
3. Perceived partner support	<b>-.19</b>	<b>-.17</b>	-						
4. Latino cultural orientation	<b>-.08</b>	<b>-.10</b>	<b>.09</b>	-					
5. Overall perceived support	<b>-.23</b>	<b>-.18</b>	<b>-.03</b>	<b>.09</b>	-				
6. American cultural orientation	<b>.01</b>	<b>.16</b>	<b>-.16</b>	<b>-.45</b>	<b>.04</b>	-			
7. Partner relationship indicator	<b>-.10</b>	<b>-.13</b>	<b>.25</b>	<b>.38</b>	<b>-.01</b>	<b>-.21</b>	-		
8. Life stress	<b>.35</b>	<b>.07</b>	<b>-.09</b>	<b>.02</b>	<b>.12</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>-.26</b>	-	
9. Maternal age	<b>-.14</b>	<b>-.35</b>	<b>-.14</b>	<b>.18</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>-.18</b>	<b>.27</b>	<b>-.11</b>	-
Mean	.71	2.18	4.10	3.87	4.49	3.56	2.31	3.60	19.56
Standard Deviation	.35	.53	2.14	.63	1.78	.90	1.28	3.21	1.21

Note. N= 103. Bolded values indicate  $p < .05$ .

**Table 2**

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Depressive Symptoms from Perceived Partner Support and Maternal Cultural Orientation

Predictors	Depressive Symptoms			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>P</i>
Step 1:				
Life stress	.05	.01	.43	< .001
Overall perceived support	-.05	.02	-.27	.004
Partner relationship indicator	.03	.03	.09	.386
American cultural orientation	-.06	.04	-.16	.128
Latino cultural orientation	-.08	.06	-.14	.195
Step 2:				
Perceived partner support	-.03	.02	-.20	.036

*Note.* Values reported correspond to the last step of the regression.

**Table 3**

Hierarchical Linear Regression Predicting Parenting Stress from Perceived Partner Support and Maternal Cultural Orientation

Predictors	Parenting Stress			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>P</i>
Step 1:				
Maternal age	-.17	.04	-.39	< .001
Overall perceived support	-.06	.03	-.20	.026
Partner relationship indicator	.02	.04	.06	.579
American cultural orientation	.05	.06	.09	.392
Latino cultural orientation	.05	.09	.06	.562
Step 2				
Perceived partner support	-.06	.02	-.23	.017
Step 3				
Perceived partner support x Latino cultural orientation	-.10	.04	-.24	.009

*Note.* Values reported correspond to the last step of the regression.